

CONSUMING MODERNITY

Public Culture in a South Asian World



CAROL A. BRECKENRIDGE, EDITOR

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS

Minneapolis / London

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290, Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Consuming modernity : public culture in a South Asian world /

Carol A. Breckenridge, editor.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-8166-2305-8

ISBN 0-8166-2306-6 (pbk.)

1. Popular culture—India. 2. India—Social life and customs.

I. Breckenridge, Carol Appadurai, 1942-

DS423.C577 1995

306'.0954—dc20

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94-46772

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Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality in Mainstream Hindi Film

ROSIE THOMAS

Mother is in peril, threatened by a villain who is—unknown to him—her own lost son, kidnapped as a child and brought up by villains. He has bound her, gagged her, and hung her from a tree. Should the barrel at her feet begin to roll, she will inevitably be strangled by the rope around her neck. Moreover, the barrel is full of petrol, the hillside is strewn with straw, and the villain has a flaming torch . . .

It is a predictably uncomfortable moment of Hindi cinema: the moral universe is grossly violated and the disorder apparently irresolvable. In many ways this one image (drawn from a comparatively successful 1979 film, *Kartavya* [Duty; producer and director Mohan Segal]) encapsulates a central dynamic of mainstream Indian cinema as a genre: the still works as a kind of trailer, which is both a condensation of a number of themes—working on many different levels—and the proposal of an enigma or tension that can be resolved only by seeing the film(s). While the image will be discussed in more detail later, it is at present simply relevant to note the coding of good and evil and the implicit moral framework around which notions of “tradition,” “modernity,” and “Indianness” are articulated. Mother, as usual, wears strictly “traditional” Indian dress: a white sari, *suhagmala*, and *kangans*.¹ The villain sports a black leather jacket, an ostentatious gold medalion, and a watch. He is bearded and holds a large gun. While at one level this

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female chastity, from other films and books to gossip about film stars. I suggested that the film should be seen as an arena within which a number of discourses about female chastity, modern nationalism, and morality intersect and feed upon each other, with significant political effects, and that this broader text offers fissured, contradictory, and partial representations and identifications. Difficult areas may be spoken of indirectly or erupt in unexpected ways inside or outside the central body of the film text. I was particularly interested in tracing ideas about tradition, modernity, and the West that emerge through the web of texts and stories about Mother India, including, in particular, the gossip surrounding the stars Nargis and Raj Kapoor.

In the present essay I approach the question of intertextuality from another angle. If other films are important texts through which any one film is produced and read, one needs to understand something about genre and the system of repetition and difference within and against which individual films operate.⁵ Basing my work on considerable discussion with filmmakers who were working in Bombay in the late 1970s and early 1980s as well as on reflections from audiences and analysis of a large number of films of that period, I have attempted to outline something of this system. It is important to stress that in outlining such an "ideal" model: (1) I am not making claims for every film: the system represents a set of structural concerns or ground rules, internalized by both filmmakers and audiences, that any individual film plays both with and against; and (2) any film is always a lot *more* than this system: in particular, films work importantly through visual and aural rhetoric and offer complex identifications and positionings.

I begin with some consideration of the formal conventions of the Hindi film as a genre and move on to develop in more detail a broader framework that is central to its system of verisimilitude. I argue that the films are involved in the construction of Indian identity in three ways: in the notion of a set of Indian conventions of film form that are markedly different from Hollywood or other cinemas; in the films' use of nationalistic or patriotic themes; and through the operation of an ideal moral universe. By this I mean that the films are centrally structured around contradictions, conflicts, and tensions primarily within the domains of kinship and sexuality, and that it is an expectation of Hindi film as a genre—in accordance with the conventions of melodrama—that these conflicts are resolved within the parameters of an ideal moral universe. This defines, somewhat rigidly, paradigms of "good" and "bad" (or expected and unacceptable) forms of behavior and requires that the forces of good triumph over evil.⁶

In this essay I attempt to uncover the terms of that universe and to show

clearly suggests the fight between good and evil, as an image it works on a number of levels and can be seen to speak of the vulnerability of "tradition" and the motherland in the face of the Western Other. Mother, as a fount of love, protection, traditional morality, and Indian culture, is rendered speechless and helpless by an aggressive West but remains nevertheless a proud, statuesque figure, stolidly awaiting her trial by fire—which of course can only test and prove her purity and ultimate impregnability.

I will argue in this essay that mainstream Hindi cinema is a central arena for the definition and celebration of a modern Indian identity, working to negotiate notions of traditional and modern India. This operates on the level both of form and of structuring content. It does not, however, operate in a vacuum: films are both one element within the "zone of cultural debate" of "public culture"⁷ and themselves arenas of contestation and debate, their meanings in the process of constant negotiation. Audiences are moved (or move) through a film, and that process is as important as any individual images, however potent, that erupt in its course.

Most of the work that has already been done on mainstream Indian cinema has been concerned with either outlining a history or describing themes and their relationship to Indian society.³ The 1981 issue of *Indian International Centre Quarterly*, inspired by Barthes and early structuralism, invited a number of academics from various disciplines to write on popular cinema, with some interesting results. The journal was an early attempt—and still one of the most successful—to uncover a "grammar" of Hindi cinema and to offer a sociological context.

Finding a model through which one can discuss the intertextuality of Hindi cinema, however, has proved more difficult. Films are complex texts: they are always read and produced in relation to other texts and discourses—other films, mythology, popular art, gossip, and so on. It is important to recognize that film imagery is both fed by and feeds other representations and that films should be placed within their wider context. In an earlier essay I attempted to focus on such representations and their interrelationships in the case of a single film, *Mother India* (1957, producer and director Mehboob Khan), the most successful film of Indian cinema history and in many ways the quintessential Indian film.⁴ The film is not simply watched, but is also talked about, is used as a reference, and has assumed mythic status within Indian popular consciousness. That essay was a (necessarily partial) uncovering of some of the other stories and imagery that open onto, and through which a mainstream Indian audience might read, the film. These range from the imagery and rhetoric of nationalism to ideas current in Indian society about

how it is involved in constructing a modern Indian identity. I suggest that the figure of the Mother largely defines (and usually concretely embodies) the field of good, that of the Villain, the field of bad. What is particularly significant is the way in which the good-evil opposition becomes subtly conflated with another set of ideas: good with associations of the traditional, that which is Indian; bad with those of the nontraditional and the "non-Indian." This means that the ideal moral universe becomes integrally bound up with a discourse on traditionalism and nationalism and, in particular, that ideas about kinship and sexuality feed directly into notions about national identity. I will argue that through operation of this moral universe the films construct an Other—a cold, calculating, rapacious, but exotic West/outsider—which has implications for the construction of notions of Indian-ness.⁷ The narrative function of the hero is to mediate between these two poles. In this operation certain elements of the "nontraditional" can become "legitimated" and incorporated within the "traditional"—that is, connotations of, for example, love marriage or women driving motorbikes can gradually be shifted through careful negotiation of the contexts within which they appear.⁸ Thus, films—including texts such as film-star gossip—are an important locus for the ongoing negotiation and transformation of a sense of "modern" Indian traditionalism. For many years sociologists have recognized the relevance of Indian films to an understanding of the process of "modernizing" India. Thus, as long ago as 1964, Singer went to Madras with "two tentative research plans, both designed to explore the ways in which cultural traditions are modernised"; the second of them was to study "how modern cultural media, especially the films, were becoming vehicles for the cultivation of new regional and national identities."⁹ His model was one of adaptation and selective assimilation into a continually evolving core of traditions: "making Indian society more 'modern' without making it any less Indian."¹⁰ While this model lacked the sophistication of more recent work on ideology and discourse theories, the notion of a constant, gradual, almost imperceptible transformation was useful, although he never followed through his intention of studying films.

In focusing on a period from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, I am concerned with a period of particularly marked transition within Hindi cinema. The ground rules of the moral universe against which the filmmakers of that period pushed were very much the ideal system from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. The result of their pushing at these boundaries has meant some significant shifts, particularly of certain of the associations of the key terms.

The underlying logic of the system as a framework within which negotiation can take place, however, is still more or less intact today.

Films and National Identity

The literature on Indian cinema has frequently asserted the national importance of Hindi cinema. For example, the Hindi of the films is said to be "the nearest [India] has yet got toward evolving a language which has flexibility, simplicity and a quality which can best be described as communicable"¹¹—and, throughout the country, is understood more widely than the unwieldy government bureaucratic Hindi. Equally, the appeal of film songs and film stars is said to transcend linguistic boundaries and regional loyalties: "The film stars are, in a sense, the most Indian of Indian citizens"¹² and:

The movies seem to be the single most powerful force in the formation of mass culture. The popularity and tremendous appeal of films and film music to the majority of Indians is a prime example. . . . With the cinema have come new concepts of speech, dress, life-style, values, family relationships, dance and music.¹³

It has been claimed that "the unconscious assimilation of [film] Hindi is really a factor in national integration"¹⁴ and also, more jokingly, that Hindi films are "the only unifying thing about India."¹⁵ Whatever the truth of these grand claims, at a very obvious level Hindi films are clearly important in establishing a sense of national identity.

First, all mainstream Indian cinema has shown an amazing resistance to Hollywood cultural imperialism. Since Indian cinema has always had its own vast distribution markets capable of sustaining the industry, its conventions were able to develop without conforming to the expectations of wider international audiences. Thus, traditional entertainment forms, notably village dramatizations of the mythological epics and also, more directly, the urban nineteenth- and twentieth-century Parsee theater with its adaptations of Shakespeare and Victorian melodrama, inflected this development, interacting, of course, with many other developments.¹⁶

Bombay filmmakers frequently stress that they aim to make films that differ in both format and content from Western films, that there is a definite skill to making films for the Indian audience, that this audience has specific needs and expectations, and that to compare Hindi films to those of the West—or those of Indian "art" cinema—is irrelevant. No successful Bombay filmmaker simply copies Western films. Of course, most borrow openly both story ideas and sometimes complete sequences from Hollywood, Hong

Kong, and other foreign cinemas, but borrowings must always be integrated with Indian filmmaking conventions if the film is to work with the Indian audience. No close copy of Hollywood has ever been a hit. Filmmakers say that the essence of "Indianization" lies in the way that the story line is developed: the crucial necessity for emotion (Western films are sometimes referred to as "cold"); and the skillful blending and integration of songs, dances, fights, and other entertainments within the film. There is also the more obvious "Indianization" of values and other content, including reference to aspects of Indian life with which audiences will identify.¹⁷

A form has evolved in which narrative is comparatively loose and fragmented, realism irrelevant, psychological characterization disregarded, elaborate dialogues prized, music essential, and both the emotional involvement of the audience and the pleasures of sheer spectacle privileged throughout the three-hour duration of the entertainment. Crucially, it involves the skillful blending of various modes—song and dance, fights, comedy, melodrama, romance, and more—into an integrated whole that moves its audience.

Second, Hindi cinema deals overtly with nationalistic themes, playing upon patriotic motifs (directly and via symbol and metaphor) and—throughout its history—anti-British sentiment. The first films of D. G. Phalke were attempts to celebrate and "teach" Indian mythology in the way that Western cinema had celebrated Christian myth. It was allegedly after seeing *The Life of Christ* that Phalke decided to make *Raja Harishchandra* (King Harishchandra; 1913, producer and director D. G. Phalke), an episode of the *Ramayana*, as India's first dramatized film.¹⁸ A decade and a half later, Himansu Rai left a successful career with UFA, the major film production company in Germany between the wars, to set up Bombay Talkies in order, he claimed, to bring international glory to the heritage of India and to put his knowledge and skills to use in the service of India.¹⁹ Throughout the thirties and forties, the genres of mythological, fantasy, and stunt film were often used as frameworks for stories that were frankly allegories about the freedom struggle—the subterfuge being necessary because the British ruthlessly censored all references to the independence movement. Thus, for example, a film in which a hero or heroine rescued a people oppressed by a wicked tyrant who had usurped his brother's kingdom would apparently be recognized as subversive by audiences but could escape the attentions of the censors.²⁰ In the seventies and eighties a number of films, notably those produced by, directed by, and starring Manoj Kumar (as "Mr. Bharat") as well as the later films of Manmohan Desai, played more blatantly—and chauvinistically—on patriotic sentiment.

The films are also, however, at a more fundamental (and less overt) level, about defining and celebrating a modern national identity. This relates to the modus operandi of Hindi cinema, in particular its conventions of verisimilitude. While its conventions of "realism" and "acceptability" are somewhat different from norms of much Western cinema, it is certainly not the case that anything goes. According to filmmakers and the trade press, there is a firm sense of local realism and logic beyond which the material is rejected as "unbelievable":

The criteria of verisimilitude appear to be closer to the film's roots in mythological drama and refer primarily to a film's skill in manipulating the rules of the film's moral universe. Thus one is more likely to hear accusations of 'unbelievability' if the codes of, for example, ideal kinship behaviour are in-epily transgressed (i.e. a son kills his mother, or a father knowingly and callously causes his son to suffer) than if a hero is a superman who single-handedly knocks out a dozen burly henchmen and then bursts into song.²¹

Thus, filmmakers ascribe the failure of *Jaanaaz* (1986, producer and director Feroz Khan) almost completely to the fact that the central hero and his father were depicted smoking, drinking, and discussing women together—behaviors that are, it is claimed, unbelievable and unrealistic.

Hindi films are structured according to the rules of melodrama, which require a universe clearly divided between good/morality and evil/decadence.²² The emphasis of the film is on *how* things will happen, not *what* will happen next, on a moral ordering to be (temporarily) resolved rather than an enigma to be solved through tight narrative denouement. The Hindi film can be regarded as a moral fable that involves its audience largely through the puzzle of resolving some (apparently irresolvable) disorder in the ideal moral universe. A central preoccupation among filmmakers is whether or not their audience will accept a certain representation or narrative outcome—that is, they operate with an explicit concept of their audience's imposing constraints on their filmmaking. Thus, the moral universe within which the films operate is a form of self-censorship based not, like the Hays Code of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, on any ideology of social responsibility or concern about the public image of the film industry, but on a firm belief that the audience will simply boycott a film that is "immoral" or clumsily transgresses the moral code.

Films are developed in script sessions that usually involve one or two screenplay writers, often a separate dialogue writer, and usually the director or producer or both as well. These are often sumptuous affairs, held in five-star hotels or glamorous holiday resorts. Considerable time and energy are

ed, to be inept, to be unconvincing, and to be a failure. Particular pleasure—both for audiences and for filmmakers in script sessions—derives from a filmmaker's proposing new ways of bending the comparatively inflexible system, which means that values and meanings are continually being negotiated on the fringes (and the total system undergoing gradual change so that certain taboos of ten or fifteen years ago are more acceptable now). I will now look more closely at this process, with illustrations from a number of films, centrally *Deewar* (The wall, 1975, producer Gulshan Rai, director Yash Chopra), a key film of the 1970s.

The Moral Universe: Mothers and Villains

The two poles of the Hindi film universe can be broadly characterized as follows. In the area of good or morality certain ideal modes of social relations and associated behaviors prevail. Foremost among these are a respect for kinship ties and obligations—usually referred to as kinship "emotion" and considered "natural" to the blood relationship—and an important stress on controlled sexuality. Although the latter has been considerably modified in recent years—since the mid-1980s chastity is no longer so important, even for heroines—casual sexual liaisons are still not completely acceptable. The principles are extended to various nonkin relationships when these are expressed in a kinship idiom. Thus a respect for "emotional" bonds between male friends (such male friendship being known as *doshtana* and talked of as, although conceptually distinct from, a brother relationship) is ideal behavior, and the ideal friend is expected to sacrifice his female love or his life (and frequently both) for his buddy.²⁴ Respect for superiors, again expressed in a kinship idiom (echoing relations between wives and husbands, children and parents, younger and elder brothers and their wives), is also central to notions of ideal behavior.

Certain other attitudes are similarly important: a passive acquiescence to fate (*kismet, naseeb*) or "God's will," deference toward religion and religious practice, religious and communal tolerance, love of one's country, and respect for justice, honesty, and principles. The thrust of these values is to construct a world in which selfish desire and individualism are overruled by emotional bonds and generosity of spirit (heart, *dil*), but both are overruled by social duties and strictures (principles, *nusool*). One of the highest accolades (which legitimizes many transgressions) is that a person has "heart"; this implies that the person is able to love and give unconditionally. The very highest accolade, however, is that a person has both heart and principles and

spent in discussing what is or is not acceptable and devising screenplay ideas

that will please their audience. It is common to hear in script-development sessions phrases such as "our audiences will not accept . . ." and "they'll burn the cinemas down if we show . . ." There is much discussion of other films—Hollywood, Indian classics, and recent Indian releases—and postmortems on recent successes and failures are a topic of keen interest. Discussions of films that flop frequently adduce evidence that the box-office failure is related to unskilled transgression of the moral universe. Thus, for example, one of the most tenacious rules of Hindi cinema, according to filmmakers, is that it is "impossible" to make a film in which a protagonist's real mother is villainous or even semivillainous, and the industry was aghast at the tenacity of one filmmaker who, in 1981, produced *Kaaren* (Reason; producer Gopi Rohra, director B. R. Ishara), in which a hero killed his mother, who was a prostitute. The film proved their point by folding after three days, for apparently no audience would watch a film that violated the rules of Hindi cinema so boldly and ineptly. (How far this is true is probably not ascertainable and is anyway irrelevant here. The point is that discussion of the possible reasons for the film's failure went no further.) In fact, very few filmmakers actually watch films with the mainstream audiences and there is none of the formalized audience research that takes place in Hollywood.

Although the filmmakers often explain that their perceived constraints are based on the fact that their audience is conservative and will not accept being shocked, there is no need to be so patronizing. The avid consumption of gossip about film stars alone suggests that audiences derive great pleasure from being shocked in certain contexts.²⁵ It is important to stress that the ideal moral universe is not necessarily believed by anyone: it is a construct of the filmmakers, with the complicity of their audience, and is as much a product of the history of Indian cinema and the genre conventions it has evolved as of other discourses in Indian society.

The Hindi film audience expects a drama that puts a universe of firmly understood—and difficult to question—rules into crisis and then resolves this crisis within the moral order. This means that transgressions must either be punished or, more excitingly, made "acceptable," that is, be rigorously justified by, for example, an appeal to humane justice, a mythological precedent, or a perceptible contradiction within the terms of the moral code itself. It appears that pleasure is derived from the image of a dangerously broken taboo erupting within a system that provides the reassuring knowledge that it will be safely resolved. If the filmmaker steps outside the moral universe to construct the resolution, however, the film is said to have cheat-

and appears to serve as the prototype of all kinship emotion (or *dill*)—that is, it is an ideally unconditional, self-sacrificing, devoted love considered natural to the blood relationship. Mother is a fount of nurturing beneficence and a vulnerable innocent, a protector of her boy child and in need of protection by him (she often appears slightly crippled or blind). She blesses him with her prayers, feeds him homely food, and sometimes mediates between him and his father, and she serves as the focus that keeps the family and home together.

Mother's sexuality must also be firmly controlled, and filmmakers believe not only that any sexual liaison, apart from that (implied) with her husband, is inconceivable, but also that, however villainous the villains, mother can never be raped. Despite the changes in the representation of heroines' sexuality in recent years, the taboo on raping mother still appears to hold—

although her chastity may be threatened. (This seems to be because rape is seen to be as much a contamination of the woman as a crime of the rapist, and mother cannot be defiled.) If her husband is dead, much is made of her placing *malas* (garlands of flowers) around his photograph; if he is alive, of her placing *stimdoor* (vermillion) in the parting of her hair, in reaffirmation of her *suhaag* (the auspicious state of having a living husband), how-ever badly he may treat her. Although mothers are played by attractive actresses frequently little older than the actors who play their sons, or else by actresses still firmly associated with their earlier roles as desirable heroines (for example, Nirupa Roy, the most frequently recurring mother of the late 1970s and early 1980s, rose to stardom playing seductive goddesses in the mythological films of the 1950s), mother must be placed, in narrative terms, largely outside the realms of sexual desire—and, of course, it is inconceivable that the mother-son relationship overtly acknowledge any sexual tinge, despite what appears to read as frankly Oedipal imagery in a fantasy mode.²⁵

Mother is invariably depicted praying in the home or in temples, advocating humility and nonviolence, proffering folk wisdoms, and passively accepting her fate as the will of God. These may of course be seen as self-evidently traditional practices. The use of the mother figure, however, also points up a metaphor that is never far from the surface in Indian discourses on both femininity and nationalisms: mother as motherland, Mother India, Mother Earth. Film imagery and dialogue play explicitly with the metaphor; the epitome of this is a scene of *Amar Akbar Anthony* that showed three adult brothers (one Hindu, one Muslim, one Christian) lying in hospital beds connected to their mother by (patently umbilical) plastic tubes through which their blood flowed to her in an emergency blood transfusion. Through win-

that the latter—respect for duty to society and the community—is placed above duty that is linked (contaminated) with emotion (feelings for kin and peers).

The field of badness or immorality is effectively defined as the converse of the good and moral: it is a place in which there is no respect for kinship duties or emotion, in which the family has broken down, in which sexuality is uncontrolled, in which there is treachery between "friends" and no respect for superiors. Fate and religion are flouted, material gain is stressed, there is defiant rejection of one's country and culture and active perpetration of injustice and dishonesty. It demarcates a set of social relationships that are selfish, calculating, and exploitative, in which people are ruthless, greedy, and without compassion and have neither principles nor emotion nor, of course, heart.

Reading broadly across the body of Hindi cinema, two archetypal figures emerge: the Mother and the Villain. In them the opposing values of good and evil are most centrally condensed. This is not to say that every film involves an actual mother figure, nor that such a character is always an unblemished paragon, nor that the degrees of villainy are not negotiable. As ideal types, however, they have evolved through the history of the genre we know as Hindi cinema and are now implicitly figures against which concrete actions represented in individual films take on meaning. They are, of course, also underpinned by reference to two key figures of Hindu mythology: Sita and Raavana, who have also frequently appeared in films; the abduction of Sita episode of the *Ramayana* is one of the most popular bases for mythological films.

THE MOTHER

As I mentioned earlier, filmmakers fervently believe that one cannot make a film in which a central mother character is truly villainous. Individual screen mothers may transgress, but in carefully negotiated ways. The ideal mother's only transgression might be that, in her zeal for self-sacrifice, she effectively abandons her family or tries to take fate into her own hands. Thus, in *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977, producer and director Manmohan Desai) a tuberculosis-ridden mother tries to kill herself so as not to be a burden on the family. In such cases, however, the narrative requires that she be punished (here by being blinded) before resolution of the moral universe is possible.

In the Hindi film, a mother's love for her son is always unquestionable

tion" associated with them (that is, they neither arouse feelings of sympathy in the audience nor show sympathy themselves). This is not to say that they are not popular with audiences—they have, particularly in recent years, become more or less cult figures and often have the wittiest lines and are associated with the most extravagant spectacle. This reinforces the point that the relationship between film and audience is not a simple one and that filmmakers' assertions about the conservatism of the audience are not the whole story. It suggests rather that pleasure for the audience stems from their involvement in a playful manipulation—and successful resolution—of the moral universe. Accordingly, the archetypal villain must always be seen to get his just deserts, either through "fate," as a direct result of his own excesses, at the hands of the hero or heroine, or, of course, (particularly pre-1980s) under the rule of the law. In the late 1980s villainy reached new heights of depravity and violence, and the sheer number of villains in each film proliferated.²⁷

One crucial aspect of the Hindi film villain (and one that cannot be apparent to the casual foreign viewer) is the fact that an audience will almost certainly know, at his first appearance, if a character is villainous or heroic. Not only are villain roles consistently played by a very small group of actors who are immediately recognizable and have cult followings as star villains, but there is also a well-developed iconography of villainy: familiar dialogues, settings, and scenarios recur through the films. Smoking, drinking, and womanizing—in particular visiting *kothas* (song and dance brothels) or keeping dancing girls in the *adha* (villain's den)—are among the most immediate signifiers of depravity.

Hindi film villainy draws on a number of prototypes: the *zamindar* (landowner), the urban underworld king (smuggler, terrorist, drug dealer, or whatever), the *dacoit* (rural outlaw), and various types of *goondas* (urban thugs, small-time crooks, racketeers, and brutish henchmen). Significantly, the villain is repeatedly placed as the outsider: invoking either the West (or "Westernization") as a signifier of moral depravity or, in the case of the *dacoit*, the "tribal." In the 1980s corrupt politicians and police officers (privately a censorship taboo) gradually, through a process of cunning negotiation on the part of filmmakers, found their place in the Hindi film Hall of Villainy.²⁸

OPPOSITION

While a number of factors feed in to construct the terms of the mother-villain opposition, Hindu mythology is crucial. Mother is frequently identi-

dows in the background appeared emblems of the three major religions of the motherland: temple, mosque, and church.

THE VILLAIN

The baroque grotesque and overblown personae of Hindi screen villains represent the antithesis of all that is valued in the moral order. The characterizations of unremittingly lecherous, treacherous, brutal, and greedy villains are as unabashedly schematic as are those of the mother figures. While mother is moral probity incarnate, the villain, by definition, breaks the most sacred taboos of the ideal moral order.²⁶

The villain is centrally the locus of uncontrolled sexuality and ruthless self-interest and an insatiable greed for material gain that overrides all emotion and compassion—no relationship is sacred, be it a kinship bond, a friendship, a working partnership, or a love affair. Villains rarely have family, and if they do, villainy apparently surfaces in every generation and the relationship with family members becomes at best a partnership in crime. The total absence of emotional attachments to family members or respect for elders is most neatly coded in recurrent scenarios of villainous sons smoking and drinking in front of their fathers—behavior that is considered rather shocking and almost certainly taboo even by many of the most "Westernized" people working in the film industry.

The villain rejects religion, lacks respect for mother figures (his own and others' mothers), defies all social and moral authority figures, and violates the traditionally sacred (for example, he may rape or kill in temple precincts or loot a village celebrating the Holi festival). The villain lacks any pride in Indian culture, usually represented either by his being a complete outsider or by his grossly parodied aping of Western mores. He is also a lawbreaker who steals, cheats, and murders, although this appears to be a less significant aspect of his villainy than his moral transgressions, in particular his thoroughgoing lack of compassion or principles: he steals from the poor, cheats *chilāren*, deceives his friends, kills his own followers, and uses brute force and violence sadistically and indiscriminately. Although moral turpitude does know some bounds—he will not rape a mother—the villain's sexuality is otherwise anarchic: he lusts, whores, and rapes indelibly and mercilessly, a lascivious leer being the sine qua non of an aspiring villain.

The construction of the villain is also subject to certain formal conventions: villains rarely sing or dance, rarely are presented as characters with a life story or mitigating circumstances, and seldom have sympathetic "emo-

leather—leather having connotations not only of impurity within the Hindu belief system but also more generally of macho aggressive [if angst-ridden] male sexuality and potency). Various specific cultural associations complement this scenario: there is implicit reference to the widow who commits *sati* (who, dressed in white, is consumed by the flames of her husband's funeral pyre) and to Sita (threatened by Raavana but also given a trial by fire). A number of oppositions suggest themselves: cotton versus leather, sari versus jacket and trousers, white versus black, *kangans* and *suhagamala* versus watch and gold medallion, controlled sexuality/chastity versus uncontrolled sexuality/male potency, Sita versus Raavana, vulnerability versus power, tradition and motherland versus Westernization and the foreign.

Of course, this uncomfortable moment is resolved, in this case through the younger brother's finally acknowledging his lost mother; being shot by the hero, his brother; killing the master villain, his stepfather; and dying in his mother's arms, stating the wish that in his next life he might be reborn as their son and brother. The moral universe has been reinstated and the disorder quieted through appropriate—if somewhat schematic—negotiation. It is to this process of negotiation that we now turn.

Negotiation

While the central opposition is conceptually clear, each film proposes its own version of dangerous disorder in the moral universe, which it is the work of the film to resolve. The disorder in *Kartavya* was a particularly daring one: what appears to be an incontrovertible villain is the central hero's brother (and central mother's son). In fact, there exists a rather murky area of semivillainy—usually reserved for the focal protagonists' close kin or domestic group—that provides scope for the all-important negotiation and redefinitions of the moral order.

Semivillains fall into three broad categories. The first is members of the key protagonists' domestic unit. These are invariably found in family social dramas and are frequently women (wicked mothers-in-law, aunts, elder brothers' wives; "lazy" daughters-in-law). Their crimes are primarily transgressions of moral ideals of kinship solidarity and support and result from foibles such as jealousy or selfishness. They are generally ultimately repentant, capitulate to the demands of family harmony, and are made to see the error of their ways and reform. They do not, on the whole, arouse audience sympathy.

The second category—usually men, often father figures—is people

fed with (and likened to) figures of the Hindu pantheon, most notably Sita, who circulates in popular, commonsense currency as the prototype of traditional Indian womanhood. Motifs from the *Ramayana* story of Sita recur throughout the films: the mother with two sons, separation from a husband, threats to the mother's chastity, various kinds of penance, and, often, a perilous escape from fire. On the other hand, the villainy of Raavana, the monstrous king of the *rakshasas* (demons), who abducted Sita, shows many parallels with that of the film villain. Moreover, just as the film villain is repeatedly placed as the outsider, so Raavana was a foreigner, the king of Lanka. The construction of villainy is, however, also fed by current discourses, for example, the fact that *vilyat* (literally, "abroad," but in fact usually a reference to Europe and the West) is commonly talked of as a place where people are cold, unemotional, machinelike, and without family (or callously reject kinship bonds and duties) as well as sexually profligate.

In describing the mother-villain opposition in this way, much is lost of the raw impact of the visual imagery that erupts in the films and appears to derive much of its potency from the indeterminacy of the levels on which it operates. Returning to *Kartavya*, the film with which I began this essay, one finds a fairly standard narrative. The film tells of two brothers, separated when young. The elder (played by Dharamendra) is a forest officer keen to stamp out the destruction and theft of trees and wild animals from India's forests. The younger (played by Vinod Mehra) had been kidnapped and brought up by villains who have become extremely rich through this smuggling operation, which he now helps to run. Their mother, who has come to stay with her elder son, recognizes her lost son (and his kidnapper) halfway through the film. Alongside subplots of romantic interest, family melodrama, and comedy, the film traces the fight between the forest officer, single-minded in his desire to see smuggling stamped out, and the villains, who want to be rid of him. The film culminates in the villains' using mother as a hostage. While the younger brother is ranting and threatening to kill her and set fire to the countryside, the elder pleads with him to put down his gun and recognize his mother and blood brother.

At the most overt level, the film depicts a gross sacrilege within the kinship domain: a son threatens violence toward his own mother. There are, however, other levels on which the film works. Coded within the still image described at the beginning of this essay is a further violation: the "ferce power of chastity" has been rendered impotent.²⁹ The paragon of controlled female sexuality (coded via white sari, *kangans*, etc.) is at the mercy of the personification of uncontrolled male sexuality (coded via gun and black

tion, functions most often as a mediator between the poles.³¹ While a minority of heroes are actually semi-villainous, dramatic tension and the emotional involvement of the audience appear to be fueled by the precariousness of the hero's position—so long as this coexists with the knowledge that the moral universe will be safely upheld. The baseline of heroism seems to consist in the fictional character's respecting what are, at present, core values in the domains of kinship and sexuality, and in the part's being played by a star. This, however, means that new meanings and values can be negotiated as certain kinds of transgressions—both marginal moral lapses and superficial signifiers of Westernization—became more ambiguously valued by virtue of association with a figure who is at base heroic.

Amitabh Bachchan's now classic films with Salim-Javed provide masterful examples of this kind of operation and were of undoubted influence in breaking new ground in the seventies and setting the terms for the contemporary era.³² *Deewar* is the story of a family separated by a moral crisis: two brothers, a smuggler (played by Amitabh Bachchan) and a police officer (Shashi Kapoor), fight on different sides of the law, and their mother is torn between love for her "bad" son and social and moral duty. In this film we find a universe that is unequivocally split. At one pole lies the world of glamorous, dangerous villainy: of gangland *gonondas* and suave "gentlemen" smuggler kings who lounge beside luxury hotel swimming pools, whiskey glasses in hand and limousines on call to shuttle between sleek offices in downtown Bombay and lonely moonlit beaches where their boats unload vast hauls of gold bullion from Dubai. In *Deewar* villainy is more diffusely located than was usual, and the film anticipates the multi-villain films of the 1980s: there are at least three separate groups of villains (with varying degrees of sophistication), but society itself is also constructed as an urban jungle, a locus of all-pervasive corruption and a source of danger.

The visual styles of the scenes of this world alternate between the garish kitsch of conventional Hindi film villainy (bright lights, lurid color, and overtly erotic spectacle—for example, the *kotaha* dancing girl) and something of the codes of two foreign genres: kung fu (the idiom of many of the fights) and the Hollywood thriller, with its dark, shadowy, blue-lit urban jungle, fights in deserted hangars and warehouses, doctored gangs, car headlights on a rainy night following a murder attempt, and smoky bars where prostitutes hang out. These scenes construct a world of paranoia, loneliness, defeatism, hard-boiled cynicism, and (male) angst close to the clichés of film noir. Western jazz music (or Muzak) is often used as a mood sound track. At the other pole lies the world of *usool* (principles)—of tradition, reli-

whose crimes may be both legal and moral but who are allowed the reprieve of mitigating circumstances. Even severe legal transgressions can be excused to some extent if they are committed in the cause of a kinship bond (for example, a father may take to crime through love for his son). Moreover, as we have seen in *Kartavya*, a brother may be morally depraved and transgress the most sacred rules of family love ("emotion") but to some extent be excused because he was brought up by villains and starved of his mother's love. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, taking revenge on crimes committed by the hard-core villains became increasingly acceptable as a mitigating circumstance; examples are the father figures in films such as *Deewar* (1975), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), *Naseeb* (1981), and *Qurbani* (1981). Such semi-villainous characters are often represented as ultimately contrite but unable to extricate themselves from their past misdeeds and villainous associates.³⁰ The moral universe requires that they be shown to be repentant and that they be punished, most often by death.

The third category, and the most interesting and significant for the present purposes, is the central heroes and heroines who break the law and associate with villains but whose transgressions are *always* hedged with mitigating circumstances. Crucially, their crimes are primarily legal rather than moral. The hero is always fundamentally a person of "heart" and "emotion," never loses compassion for the good and the poor, and respects the bonds of kinship morality (and is especially loving and dutiful to mother). This figure may have to repent and be punished but has audience sympathy throughout. It is often seen as somewhat paradoxical that the fictional heroes and heroines of Hindi cinema can transgress some of the central tenets of traditional Indian mores, flaunt clothes and lifestyles that are "Westernized" to a degree that in the friends and acquaintances of much of the Hindi film audience would be quite unacceptable—even scandalous—and yet retain the audience's sympathy and serve unproblematically as the focus of identification. This is not a wholly new development. Throughout the history of Indian cinema, heroes have sometimes been criminals: Ashok Kumar was a thief in the 1940s smash hit *Kismet*, as was Raj Kapoor in the 1950s *Awarana* and Raj Kumar in the 1960s *Wagh*, to take just a few examples. Moreover, even in the abundant love stories, the very fact that the lovers make their own choice of partner rather than accepting that of their parents marks them as distinctly subversive of traditional mores. This negotiation is crucial to an understanding of change in the Hindi film and the work of the film in constructing shifting notions of "traditional modern" identities.

Clearly, the hero figure, rather than simply embodying good and tradi-

gion, and the law—centrally that of the innocent, humble, vulnerable, nurturing mother, who accepts as her fate that exploitation and abuse are the rewards of honest toil and denounces violence and retaliation. Her joy in life is to look after her sons (and at one time her husband); dressed almost throughout the film in white saris, she is a model of controlled sexuality. Most importantly, she accepts that whatever the personal sacrifice, her duties as an *aurat* (woman) come before her emotions as a *maa* (mother). When she has given her “good” son, the dutifully honest police officer Ravi, her blessings before he sets out to kill her favorite son, the renegade Vijay, she leaves to meet Vijay at the temple, saying, “Aurat apna farz nibha chuki. Ab ma apne bete ka intezaar karne jahi hai” (The woman has done her duty. Now the mother is going off to await her son). Much is made of Ravi’s humble lifestyle and meager salary. He quotes his role model from the *Mahabharata*: Arjuna, who slayed his own brother on the battlefield in obedience to Krishna’s commands. Ravi takes lessons in traditional wisdom from an elderly schoolteacher, protects and cherishes his mother, and coyly courts his demure middle-class girlfriend through flowers-and-sunshine love songs set in a pretty hill station.³³ The visual style and motifs of this world are primarily those of Hindi film melodrama: romantic songs and dances (eroticism displaced onto aspects of camera work and spectacular mise-en-scène), interludes of comedy (Ravi as a rather bumbling joker), police stations with pictures of Gandhi on the walls, hospital dramas, scenes in temples, and numerous images of domesticity (eating, cooking, praying in the home). Ravi is also, at one particularly emotional moment, associated with the tune of the Indian national anthem.

The narrative structure can be simply schematized thus:

Order: Happy family with principles and strong emotional bonds.
 Disorder: Villains (with no principles or emotions) force father to sacrifice his principles for his emotional attachment to the family. Society spurns them and the family is split.
 Order: Villainy (lack of principles and emotion) is punished. Mother and good son sacrifice their emotional attachment (to Vijay) for their principles (duty to society). Society rewards them.

Thus, there are two levels of opposition: the conflict between good (those with principles and emotion) and bad (those with neither), in which good must triumph; and the conflict within the domain of good between principles and emotion, in which principles (duty) must triumph.

Narrative events clearly depict the victory of good over bad: villainy and

the nontraditional are destroyed (killed or arrested) by the forces of law and tradition. Interestingly, the message is also reiterated on the level of the structural organization of the film’s visual modes themselves, and visual style is an important signifying element. Thus the film uses motifs and quotations from foreign film genres (kung fu and Hollywood) only in scenes of the non-traditional, as surface signifiers of glamorous exotic villainy. As order is restored to the moral universe, these modes are gradually taken over by Hindu idiom, with tears, temples, and a mother-son deathbed reunion. The last image of the film is of a police convention paying homage to the mother.

This description, however, neglects the role of Vijay, the “bad” brother, whose function is not only to provide the testing ground for the principles-versus-emotion opposition in the domain of good but also to mediate between the two worlds. The central dynamic of the character hinges on a tension between his exemplary “cool” (he is sophisticated, tough, dangerous, and loyal and loving son and brother). Throughout the film, Vijay does things the “conservative” Indian audience is said to disapprove of: he smokes, drinks whiskey, has a liaison with a prostitute, wears fashionable Western clothes, drives sleek foreign cars, takes the law into his own hands, refuses (until the end) to accompany his mother to the temple, criticizes his father, and makes hundreds of thousands of “black” rupees as leader of Bombay’s most notorious smuggling gang.

While Vijay is, in terms of the moral universe, bad enough to merit punishment and death, he is also good enough to be the focal hero, to remain in his mother’s favorite, and to die in her arms in the temple, with her blessings. Filmmakers discussing the effectiveness of this negotiation invariably pointed out that the prime extenuating factor was the central place given in the film to Vijay’s love for his mother. A flashback to his poverty-stricken mother, struggling to support her two young sons, accompanies—and “justifies”—his first temptation to join the smuggling gang; he spends much of his money on expensive presents for her; he is heartbroken when she leaves him; and in his dying moments his only thought is to rejoice in the temple. His crimes are mitigated by being presented as fired by desire for revenge on a corrupt society, especially as it had been particularly harsh on his beloved mother; although he is hardly a Robin Hood, his crimes are committed not principally out of selfish greed but to benefit others. He is presented largely as a victim of fate who carries the burden of a monstrously unfair tattoo on his arm (“My Father Is a Thief,” tattooed to taunt him by

enemies of his father), who knows no peace of mind (*shanti*) and so misguidedly rejects the law and honesty as impractical and inadequate.³⁴

Whatever his transgressions, the baseline of heroism is respected throughout: not only is the role played by one who is unequivocally a star, but the character of Vijay has "heart." He honors the canons of ideal behavior in the kinship domain and, unlike hard-core villains, values family relationships; he is not only an ideal son but also an exemplary elder brother (as a child he had worked so that his brother could be educated). The uncontrolled sexuality signified by his affair with an ex-prostitute, Anita, is recuperated when, toward the end of the film, she reveals that she is pregnant. Vijay immediately suggests that he marry her, relinquishing his life of crime, and give himself up to the police so that his son will not have the stigma of a criminal father. Anita, as a potential mother, abruptly stops drinking, and the film reveals that tucked away in her wardrobe of flowery minidresses and skimpy tops is a red wedding sari—remnant of a "shattered dream" of her mother's. She is not just a whore with a heart of gold but, after all, a good girl who, with the aid of a red sari, marriage, and motherhood, can be exonerated and elevated to Hindi film heroinedom provided, of course, that she dies—which she does, with full audience sympathy.

Although the narrative may punish Vijay's villainy (by death) and recuperate certain aspects of it (by his change of heart—he finally visits the temple), there is no reason to believe that this overrides the fact that the film offers a succession of vivid images in which nontraditional behaviors are associated with a supremely charismatic hero figure and star who was, at the time, an undoubted figure of sympathy and adoration. Furthermore, throughout the film the mother's favorite son was Vijay rather than his brother Ravi, who more obviously embodied traditional heroic values.

The effect of such play with the moral universe was undoubtedly to shift certain key associations around a "modern" Indian identity within the films in the 1970s. In particular, it explored a new model of male heroism that was powerful, aggressive, defiant, self-respecting, sophisticated, successful, and at home with the accoutrements of a Westernized lifestyle, yet still respectful of traditional values. *Deewar* itself includes a number of other models of masculinity—father, teacher, policeman—but each is shown to be patently deficient. Father is, for most of the film, a significant absence (alluded to from time to time by images of moving trains), an inadequate, displaced masculinity, cowardly and passive. The elderly teacher is humble, principled, and wise but poverty-stricken and downtrodden. While Ravi is many of the things that traditional Indian heroes should be—dutiful, soft and romantic

but strong—it is still Vijay who has the greater share of his mother's love. While tough masculinity had been seen in Hindi cinema before Amitabh, it was rarely in a central hero figure and in, for example, *Mother India*, it was the mother, Radha, who was the focus of audience sympathy, not her rebellious son Birjuo.

In the context of the 1970s, the Vijay persona, and *Deewar*, did much to sweep away the cult of the soft romantic hero, and in fact paved the way for more radical challenges of traditional authority. Amitabh's next success with Salim-Javed, *Trishul* (Trident; 1978, producer Gulshan Rai, director Yash Chopra), went one step further and roused considerable controversy because the angry young man, an illegitimate son seeking to avenge his mother's honor, addressed his wayward father as "my illegitimate" father (that is, he refused him the respect due to one's father according to traditional mores). Again by clever negotiation of the characters and situations the transgression was made acceptable. One suspects that it was out of these, now comparatively mild, breakthroughs that the films of the 1980s, in which heroes directly challenge both father figures and a corrupt patriarchal law, have become possible. Finally, *Deewar* must be seen as part of a trend throughout the 1970s in which overtly Westernized lifestyles and, most notably, less than virtuous heroines become increasingly acceptable as hero figures.

Films and Wider Circulation of Meanings

It would, of course, be absurd to claim that films alone shift values and meanings: there is always (at least) a double movement in which play with the terms of the films' moral universe becomes acceptable, pleasurable, or necessary because of other factors currently operating within the sociopolitical arena. I have argued that Hindi film imagery is part of a regime of representation that constructs—and changes—the meanings accruing to "India" and the "West," "traditional" and "modern," and that the negotiation of the moral universe, in particular the play with the hero or heroine, is central. But the images that films use also have preexisting associations, the audience is vast and heterogeneous, and readings are inflected by other discourses that impinge on the films and are part of the popular preconscious. In using the format of the moral story, filmmakers are drawing on a well-worn tradition within Indian popular culture: not only that of the key epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (to which filmmakers quite consciously refer)³⁵ but also that of more apparently peripheral forms, for ex-

ample, the *karni bharni* (reap as you sow) poster calendars. These wall charts were popular throughout India until the late 1970s, but are still found in some rural areas today. They depict, graphically—and somewhat gruesomely—the appropriate punishment for various kinds of misdeeds as meted out by Vishnu, the protector of dharma. Misdemeanors range from the “false speaker” to the black marketer, from the “overloader of animals” (whose fate is to have both arms cut off and pull a rickshaw containing a whip-cracking human monster) to the counterfeiter (who is savaged by sharklike monsters). Significantly, most of these transgressions are not primarily legal crimes but focus on areas familiar from the arena of film villainy: lack of compassion, violence, deceit and hypocrisy, abdication of public duty, and uncontrolled sexuality. Most interesting is the considerable overlap with film iconography. Thus the counterfeiter, dressed in Western collar and tie, sits with cigarette in one hand, drink in the other, at a table stacked high with bundles of banknotes. The tax defaulter flaunts the crucial status symbol—a telephone—and lounges on a bed against ornate cushions beside a neat flower arrangement (connotations of controlled nature, sophistication, and luxury) and an exotic painting of ships in the moonlight (with perhaps connotations of the glamorous world of smuggling).

While the *karni bharni* tradition feeds into the films, the films feed back into the iconography of the calendar artists. Images of Hindi film villainy also circulate more widely through popular culture and consciousness and inspire both the mythology that has grown up around smugglers and the Bombay underworld and that around *dacoits*. Thus it is claimed that film imagery has influenced the present-day appearance of the real *dacoits* operating in the Chambal Valley. According to Sunil Dutt, Chamba *dacoits* rarely rode horses or carried guns before his film *Mujhe Jeene Do* (1961). Meanwhile, the *dacoit* became so glamorous an image in the early 1980s that in Mussoorie, a popular hill resort, Indian tourists would frequent photographers’ stalls to pose for their photographs in *dacoit* outfits—cowboy-style fringed jackets, turbans, moustaches, guns—clearly inspired by film imagery.

The issue of intertextuality is obviously crucial, but one of the central questions to consider in discussing the notion of public culture is how to describe all the forces in play within the arena. My essay on *Mother India* made one type of foray into this territory. One could of course repeat the exercise with *Deewar*, which would involve citing not only the references to other and earlier films (including *Mother India*) and the personae built up around the stars, their liaisons, and the gossip about their “private” lives, but also references to a variety of mythologies of decadent Otherness, from the *karni*

bharni calendars to the media mythology surrounding Haji Mastan, Bombay’s notorious and highly glamorized smuggler king of the mid-1970s. One would also, of course, need to situate the film in a social, political, and historical context, notably that of the months leading up to Indira Gandhi’s 1975 declaration of a state of emergency. It would also be relevant to look at the whole era of transition referred to in this essay in the context of a political shift from a state nationalism broadly modeled on a family morality to its breakdown into regionalism and the legitimization of communalism—like a family with rebellious sons.

If one takes on board the full implications of intertextuality, however, one inevitably recognizes that writing can ever be only a partial uncovering, and in the final analysis there is an infinite regress of context. In focusing here on the assumptions and perceived constraints within which the filmmakers work, I have tried to outline one aspect of these other texts and also to understand something of the mechanism by which the arena of public culture operates as a zone of debate. Films are in no sense a simple reflection of the wider society, but are produced by an apparatus that has its own momentum and logic. The filmmakers are in no simple way in control (even leaving aside debates on auteurship and the death of the author):³⁶ they are part of this apparatus and are crucially constrained by their internalized systems of rules and by their own perceptions of audience expectations and of other factors in the field. These perceptions are of course undermined by a more fundamental constraint: the economic context of the film industry within which they work.

The Bombay film industry is an anarchic free market within which filmmakers have to sink or swim. Of course, most are motivated by the desire not only to survive but also to make the large amounts of money that are possible within this system. Almost all films are independent productions financed piecemeal by a combination of private financiers (who extort prohibitive—and illegal—interest rates) and the preselling of rights to distributors in each of the six major territories of India. Power in the system—in the form of control over the final form of the film—does not lie unambiguously with any one group of people but is constantly subject to negotiation between producers, distributors, financiers, directors, writers, stars, and others. The size of the budget of the average Hindi film means that it must make money in most, if not all, of the six territories if it is to make a profit, and therefore the ultimate reference point is invariably beliefs about what pleases audiences. This involves a (mostly knowing) exploitation of crude populist sentiment and a model of a heterogeneous audience to which films

have to cater by putting in elements for everybody—failing which the distributors for any territory that has been ignored will opt out or apply pressure. Thus the apparent "national integration" that the films promote can be seen as a direct effect of the economic pressures of the industry.³⁷

From the earliest days filmmakers knew that one of the most certain ways of appealing to a pan-Indian audience was to draw on the mythological epics. Filmmakers have also known, however, that a successful film must mark both repetitions and differences from other films. Some filmmakers appear to understand better than some of their so-called intellectual critics how genre operates:

People seem to like the same thing again and again, so I repeat it . . . but you always have to give them something different, too. . . . There can be no such thing as a formula film—if there was, everybody would be making nothing but hits.³⁸

We have seen that one element of "difference" has involved pushing the boundaries of the moral framework, thereby connecting with some of the key concerns of a society in transition in a postcolonial world, concerns about changes in moral values matched with an ambivalent attitude to the Western world. Thus we see an apparent paradox of the Hindi film: it is at once founded upon remarkable cultural specificity (epic texts and uniquely Indian symbols) but also strikes chords that make it the most popular cinema throughout much of the developing world. It would appear that it was not simply the fact that the tales of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were familiar throughout India that ensured their suitability but the fact that, as moral fables, they offered the framework for melodrama, within which the perennial battle between good and evil could become the arena in which the "modern" can be constantly negotiated.

Notes

1. *Suhagmata*: marriage necklace; *kangam*: wedding bangles. A white sari is usually worn by widows and is a signifier of controlled sexuality.

2. Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, "Why Public Culture?" *Public Culture* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 6.

3. For history, see Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980 [1963]), and Firoze Rangoonwala, *Indian Cinema Past and Present* (New Delhi: Clarion, 1983). For themes and their relationship to society, see Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenoir, eds., *Indian Cinema Superbazaar* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983); and Sudhir Kakar, "The Ties That Bind" and Ashish Nandy, "The Popular Hindi Film, Ideology and First Principles," both in *Indian Popular Cinema*, ed. Pradip Krishen, *Indian International Centre Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1981).

4. Rosie Thomas, "Sanctity and Scandal: The Mythologisation of Mother India," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 4, no. 3 (1989).

5. Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).
6. As Douglas Sirk, master of Hollywood melodrama, put it, melodrama as a form requires the "deux ex machina of the happy end." This does not, however, preclude its strength lying in "the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes" (Laura Mulvey, "On Sirk and Melodrama" *Moviet*, no. 25 [1977-78]).

7. I am not suggesting that the Occidental Other is a simple reversal of the Oriental Other. Said himself argued that there was no such thing as Occidentalism (*Orientalism* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978]). Gayatri Spivak makes the important point that the play of power relations already in the field means that it is a different experience for the West to see it-self marginalized within Indian representations than for India to see itself constantly so positioned within colonial (and neocolonial) discourse (in *Europe and Its Others*, vol. 1, ed. E. Barker et al. [Essex: University of Essex, 1984], p. 128). The concept does seem useful, however, in pointing up some of the unspoken assumptions within Indian popular culture about Indian-ness (and non-Indian-ness).

8. Riding a motorized two-wheeler would appear to brand a woman as "fast," and even in Indian cities (apart from Pune, for mainly historical reasons) few women will risk their reputations in this way. Women on scooters were also a recurrent image in saucy popular calendar-art in the 1960s and 1970s. Gradually, though the early 1980s, filmmakers played with placing heroines on motorbikes; a notable breakthrough was Hema Malini, the "dream girl" of the industry, in *Naseeb* (Destiny; 1981, producer and director Manmohan Desai).

9. M. Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernises* (London: Pall Mall, 1972), p. 247.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
11. *Statesman*, July 7, 1958, quoted in Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Cinema*, 1963 edition.

12. Kobia Sarkar, *Indian Cinema Today* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1975), p. 143.
13. M. L. Apte, *Mass Culture, Language and Arts in India* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1978), pp. 9, 25.
14. Sarkar, *Indian Cinema Today*, p. 145.

15. Javed Akhtar, in an interview with the author, February 1981.
16. Information on Parsee theater is drawn from D. Varshay, "Modern Hindi Literature 1850-1900," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Allahabad University, and R. K. Yagnik, *The Indian Theatre: Its Origins and Later Development under European Influence, with Special Reference to Western India* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1933).
17. For more detailed development of these ideas, see Rosie Thomas, "Indian Cinema, Pleasures and Popularity," *Screen* 26, nos. 3-4 (1985).

18. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, p. 11.
19. Devika Rani, in an interview with the author in Bangalore, January 1989, stressed how important the ideals of the nationalist movement were in motivating Himansu Rai's filmmaking career in India.
20. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, p. 124. See also Behroze Gandhi and Rosie Thomas, "The Indian Film Stars," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), for discussion of Fearless Nadia, film censorship, and the nationalist movement.

21. Thomas, "Indian Cinema, Pleasures and Popularity," p. 128.
22. The notion of a moral universe in melodrama is a key concept in Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976).
23. Hundreds of film-gossip magazines peddling interviews with and scandalous innuendo about stars are published—and make money—in India. They are printed in all languages, al-

though those published in English (*Stardust, Super, Star and Style, Cine Blitz*) are the glossiest—and most salacious.

24. This refers primarily to heroes, but a female "buddy" theme has been attempted at least

once: *Pathar ke Sanam* (Promises of stone; 1967, producer and director Raja Nawathe) stars

Waheda Rehman and Mumtaz as two women in love with the same man.

25. For example, the stills from *Kartavya*, where details such as the angle of the gun would

seem to speak that which must be consciously denied.

26. The villain, as ideal type, appears to be male. There are of course many villainesses

within the dramas, but these tend to be either sidekicks of the villains (and are often present

primarily to define their depravity) or less relentlessly evil and more prone to repentance and

forgiveness (see discussion on semivillainy).

27. See Madhu Jain, "The Day of the Villain," *India Today*, November 30, 1988.

28. See Rosie Thomas in *World Cinema Since 1945*, ed. William Luhr (New York: Ungar,

1987), pp. 320-21.

29. For further elaboration of the concept of "the fierce power of chastity" see Chris Fuller,

"The Divine Couple in South India," *History of Religions* 19, no. 4 (1980): 327.

30. See the description of the *Karni Bhairni* wall chart tradition.

31. "Hero figure" refers to both males and females, but during this period the narratives of

most films in fact revolve around male hero figures.

32. Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar were a filmwriting duo who emerged in the early 1970s

with *Zanjeer* (1973, producer and director Prakash Medra). The film *Chains* established Ami-

tabh's reputation as an "angry young man" and as the superstar of Hindi cinema in the 1970s

and early 1980s. The duo went on to write a string of films starring Amitabh that were almost

all very big hits. They themselves became celebrities and were instrumental in raising the sta-

tus—and fees—of Bombay screenplay writers.

33. These sections have sometimes been edited out in versions of the film screened in the

West.

34. The thrust of the film's overt resolution is to suggest that with men of "principles"

around (i.e., Ravi) the law is adequate—an uneasy resolution that began to break down in the

films of the 1980s.

35. It is common to hear filmmakers say that every film can be traced back to these stories,

and even that there are only two stories in the world, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

36. Ronald Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977).

37. Regional films are produced on much smaller budgets and frequently have state

funding.

38. Manmohan Desai in an interview with the author, May 1981.

Repositioning the Body, Practice, Power, and Self in an Indian Martial Art

PHILLIP B. ZARRILLI



CHAPTER EIGHT

In mid-January 1984, after seven months of field research and training in Kerala, India, on the region's martial/medical art, *kalarippayattu*,¹ and a brief two-week stopover in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to visit Ustaz Haji Hamzah Haji Abu's International Kalari-Payat Dynamic Self-Defence Institute,² I returned home to Madison, Wisconsin, to receive a copy of the January 11, 1984, issue of *New Thrill* forwarded to me by my Malaysian host. *New Thrill* is a twice-weekly English-language tabloid published in Kuala Lumpur, which, according to its subtitle, "prob[es] the unknown, the mysterious and the exciting" for its presumably young and primarily male Malaysian reader-ship. Framed by moral platitudes and distanced by the veneer of an investigative report, the cover story by "Mai-Pen-Kai" provocatively described the lives of several young Thai prostitutes with sufficient detail to titillate the male Malaysian readers who might either travel to Thailand for sex or at least fantasize about doing so.³

I leafed through the tabloid, skimming other stories that probed "the unknown, mysterious, and exciting," including "The [Hollywood] Stars Who Live in Fear" (Olivia Newton-John, Kate Jackson, Robert Redford, and Barbra Streisand); an article about how Jackie Bisset, Raquel Welch, and Joan Crawford were "waitresses while waiting for stardom"; two stories in the "Probe the Unknown" section, "Orgone Energy" and "The Druid Who