

MELODRAMA AND THE SECULAR SUBJECT

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Melodrama and the Secular Subject argues that, if in the West, melodrama emerged as templates of moral virtue and action to cope with the void once occupied by the authority of the Church and Monarchy, in postcolonial and transnational contexts this argument is turned on its head: melodrama generates models of secular relationality through affective networks of public culture. I situate melodramatic representation in relation to the emergence of the Indian nation as a new global power and the violent assertion of its government as a security state. The changes wrought by recent policies favoring neoliberalization and communal or religious extremism intersect as the popularity of Indian film industries present themselves as crucial nodes in the national and global mediascape. Furthermore, the dissertation argues that India's postcolonial predicament lies in the state's inability to resolve its contradictory definitions of secularism and citizenship. The state's conflicting definitions of secularism—as separation of state and religion, on the one hand, as respect for religious difference, on the other—result in an impasse resolved through the violent disavowal of gendered and other difference and the imposition of a single de-facto masculinist Hindu identity. State secular policy casts minoritized women and subaltern groups as the nation's failed citizen subjects, thereby producing a subaltern spectral citizenry. Constituting an aesthetics of "failure," the dissertation argues that those very narrative and aesthetic features used to denigrate postcolonial fiction and Bollywood film melodrama as unrealistic, excessive, and escapist, such as coincidence,

impersonation, doublings, and flashbacks, though resembling irrational failures of realist representation, offer alternative concepts of temporality and ethical understanding. Through strategies of public consumption and spectatorial address, the melodramatic representations the dissertation examines, such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Deepa Mehta's film adaptation, *Earth*, of Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, and Manil Suri's novel *Death of Vishnu* throw into crisis the very category of citizenship. The circuits of affect and action produced in this traffic of melodramatic texts highlight the importance of moving beyond understandings of popular culture as false consciousness or mass culture to public culture, a new site for political expression and intervention.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sheetal Majithia was born in Mbale, Uganda. She was educated in Nairobi, Kenya; Kolhapur, India; and, finally, Chappaqua, New York. She received her B.A. from Columbia University in New York, where she studied English and Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures. After a year in Varanasi as an American Institute of Indian Studies Language Fellow, she studied in the Department of South Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Chicago before coming to study Comparative Literature at Cornell University. She has taught at the University of Pennsylvania and in the School of Humanities and Cultural Studies at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. She will join the faculty of NYU Abu Dhabi as Assistant Professor in the fall of 2009.

for Damayanti Solapurkar

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The moment the planes ripped through the skin of the World Trade Towers, a profound emotional, historical and political event shattered American security. It was a moment when the world was united and brought together, albeit momentarily, in grief. But it was also a moment when the world was severed and polarized through the rhetoric of “good” and “evil,” the “civilized” and the “barbaric,” and of “us” and “them.”¹

When human beings seek to make sense of the world as it changes, it's not just that they may sometimes get it wrong but that they are bound, at points, to get it wrong. In the face of change, familiar systems of knowledge and understanding—inflected by desires, interests, cosmogonies, histories, structures of feeling, and organizations of power—continue to generate explanations. Alongside these explanations, ugly, unwelcome, implausible, unrepresentable alternatives—Caliban—will appear on the horizon (or on the beach), be acknowledged and rejected. Others will then come along and often through great struggle bring the alternative into truth, believability, and beauty. This is how knowledge and certainties unfold as the world changes.²

I shall now return to the themes of “failure,” “lack,” and “inadequacy” that so ubiquitously characterize the speaking subject of “Indian” history. As in the practice of the insurgent peasants of colonial India, the first step in a critical effort must arise from the gesture of inversion. Let us begin from where the transition narrative ends and read “plenitude” and “creativity” where this narrative has made us read “lack” and “inadequacy.”³

The attacks in the U.S. of September 11, 2001 and the aftermath of ongoing failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq provoked radical shifts in global understandings of concepts of identity, nation, and culture. If it had been

¹ Ratna Kapur, “Un-veiling Women’s Rights in the ‘War on Terrorism’,” *Duke Journal of Gender, Law, and Policy* 9 (Special Double Issue: Gender Laws in Healthcare: Privacy & Paternalism; Special Topic: Gender and War) (2003): 211.

² Mary Louise Pratt, “Living Change: Thoughts for Humanists in Troubled Times,” *ADE Bulletin* 136 (winter 2004): 12–17.

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 34–35.

possible for nation-states previously to imagine that they determined the degree of their participation in global events, these events revealed the limited role remaining for isolationist and autonomous governance. The mutual constitution of the national and the transnational was made visible around the globe. In the U.S., these transformations guided state initiatives in foreign security, economics, and public governance and resulted in an extraordinary expansion of state power and unprecedented curtailment of civil liberties, the full documentation, analysis, and disclosure of which still remains to be done. As such, the examination of these conditions since then has resulted in foregrounding issues of comparison and co-existence across difference in the academy and to some degree at the level of the state.

Indeed, the intersection of state and humanities' interests in the language and rhetoric of citizenship has reconfigured postcolonial, globalization, and area studies in provocative ways, with increased attention to the very language and terms through which we in the U.S. academy understand and translate concepts and concerns that have come into sharper focus since September 11, 2001. In our efforts to "make sense of the world as it changes," as Pratt suggests, and get beyond the divisive dichotomies that continue to fuel the fervor for military retaliation, our understanding of the role of religion and secularism in determining relations within and between nations comes to the fore as a site where the academy and the state did "get it wrong." In the obvious failure of understanding represented by the polarization Kapur describes, we see that the foundations of epistemological inquiry and certainty giving way to a crisis of comparison and an urge to re-examine the licenses and limitations of secularism.

The subject of secularism

The regular threat of religious or communal violence that emerges from the Indian state's inability, or even refusal, to productively resolve the conflicting definitions of secularism and citizenship—two factors considered guarantors of equal representation in a modern democratic nation—serves as the backdrop for the examples of public culture in India that I examine in the dissertation. There are many examples of state-engineered communal violence that reveal the failures of India's secular policy. At the time of this writing, coordinated suicide bombings in Mumbai, Jaipur, and simultaneous incidents in Bangalore and Ahmadabad have resulted in the deaths of hundreds and the injuries of thousands. These most recent events can be understood at least in part as responses to state-sponsored pogroms in Godhra, Gujarat in 2001 where over 2,000 Muslims died and almost 140,000 were left as refugees after the torching of a train allegedly by a group of Muslim extremists who were said to have targeted pilgrims returning from Ayodhya. Massacres of this scale find precedence only in the violence accompanying the independence of India and Pakistan from colonial rule and the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. I argue that the contradictory definition of secularism in India, as separation of religion and state (*dharmanirapekshata*) on the one hand but also alternatively as respect for all religions (*sarva dharma sama bhava*) on the other, demands a resolution, which is forced through the fixing of citizen subjects along religious lines, resulting not in respect for all religions in practice, but rather in the imposition of one dominant religion—Hinduism—a process which threatens minoritized groups, such as Muslims, women, and Dalits, the focus of my study.⁴ These

⁴ The Indian state's failure to guarantee religious and ethnic freedom in this case suffers not

events demonstrate that the secular project in India fails to maintain the very difference it is meant to ensure and instead is deployed to eradicate religious minorities. In particular, the realist prose of secular policy, articulated in the language of the law, fails to account for the difference it signifies.⁵

Melodrama as an aesthetics of “failure”

With these imperatives in mind, my dissertation examines the melodramatic mode as an alternative to the realist prose generally associated with the historical representation of postcolonial secularism. The terms *realist* and *secular* in my usage draw on Chakrabarty’s description of the two in the process of writing: “We are obliged—as historians and social scientists—to translate this world back into our prose which is both realist and secular. Realist in that we subscribe some notion of an objective and real world that remains describable in prose, and secular in that the world for us historians remains, in Weber’s terms, disenchanted.”⁶ In contrast to the realist discourse of law, bureaucracy, and policy regarding secularism and the realism of cultural critics who insist that secularism necessarily offers the only foundation for democracy, I argue that the much-maligned mode of

only the Muslim minority community but, in other cases, other minorities, perhaps most visibly, Sikhs. Recall, for example, the state-organized violence that targeted members of the Sikh community in Delhi in 1984 that resulted in the deaths of 4,000 Sikhs in the three days following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The state’s violent response was in keeping with previous repressive acts such as the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Called Operation Blue Star, the Indian army stormed the temple in the name of apprehending Sikh extremists whom the state claimed were hoarding weapons. The takeover resulted in the deaths of almost 500 civilians, 80 soldiers, and the apprehension of almost 1500 others accused of association with the extremists. Subsequently, the Indian army saw Sikh soldiers resigning all over the country and the event led finally to the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

⁵ See: Dipesh Chakrabarty on a “realist prose of rights” where he argues that a certain notion of realism is necessary for securing rights. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Realist Prose and the Problem of Difference: The Rational and the Magical in Subaltern Studies,” Shakespeare-Postcoloniality Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, July 1996. Subsequent references to Chakrabarty’s ideas in this paragraph refer to this paper.

melodrama, particularly as it is appropriated into public culture, stages alternative models of secular understanding in the postcolonial context. If the task at hand is to produce a “form of thought whereby human differences are not sublated into overarching universal categories that in effect neutralize those differences (Chakrabarty 1996),” melodrama’s privileging of affect might suggest ethical understandings of the “other” such that the truth value of realism as a means of documenting scientific and rational proof might be destabilized and the possibility for its cooptation into engendering violence in the very name of secularism might be critiqued.⁷

Constituting what I call an aesthetics of “failure,” I argue that those very narrative and aesthetic features used to denigrate postcolonial fiction and Bollywood⁸ film melodrama as unrealistic, excessive, and escapist such as coincidence, impersonation, doublings, and flashbacks, though resembling irrational failures of realist representation, offer alternative concepts of temporality to the linearity of secular, homogenous, and empty time underlying universal modernity as a concept. Underlying these seemingly failed conventions is a sense of temporality as subjunctive, as the representation of an outcome to which one aspires or for which one hopes. While foregrounding the themes of delay, missed opportunities, or suspense, the necessary or teleological outcome of the narrative or plot is made less concrete or fixed. While the simultaneity of events or roles in the case of coincidence or in the act of impersonation seems like a failure of realism

⁷ Saba Mahmood, “Is Critique Secular?: A Symposium at UC Berkeley,” *Public Culture* 20.3 (2008): 447–452.

⁸ Bollywood refers to the Bombay film industry located in now Mumbai, India. It signifies not only the site of film production and structure of funding but also a style of mixed genres characteristic of popular films. Although other centers of film production exist for the Tamil and Bengali film industries—Kollywood in Chennai and Tollywood in Kolkata—Bollywood sometimes refers to the style of these popular films despite their various sites of production and linguistic differences.

because these conventions demand the suspension of disbelief and the excess of enchantment, I argue that it is precisely this state of affective captivation that provokes new understandings of otherness whereby difference is not “neutralized” but rather maintained as singularity. In the expression of subjunctive temporality, there exists the moment of the present as well as another possibility that has not been realized. In that possibility lies the opportunity for alternative models of relationality and politics.

My interest in re-examining failure as a productive category has been provoked by contemporary debates in postcolonial studies scholarship devoted to critiques of the idea of universal modernity derived from Enlightenment thought and its attendant political projects. The failure of progress and universal modernity premised on reason relates to Gayatri Spivak’s work on the impossibility of actually registering subaltern speech to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s effort to provincialize Europe via the postcolony.⁹ It relates the need for a sense of multiple sites of modernity as conceptualized in the claim made by Arjun Appadurai’s that “modernity is at large” to Lowe and Lloyd’s argument for “alternative modernities.”¹⁰ While these works vary in their specific aims, they share the assumption that categories of universal modernity fail to explain the postcolonial condition adequately. By considering narratives of “enchantment” as irrational and therefore lacking or failed by virtue of their affective qualities, these works question the sense of the progressive linear temporality underlying a universalizing narrative of modernity.

⁹ Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 738. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

Political theorists have been committed to conceptualizing secularism in India. Surprisingly, considering the state of religious violence in India at present, scholars of literary, cultural, and visual studies have been less a part of the dialogue. At the same time, within postcolonial studies, Subaltern Studies scholarship on South Asia has examined “history from below” by focusing on subaltern struggle as counter-insurgency, with little work on popular or public culture as such. If subaltern studies began as a project of critiquing elite historical accounts of the nation while eliding resistance to hegemonic structures of power, the ten volumes published since its inception as well as the attendant scholarship and debate generated by the project link the category to other lines of inquiry where “subalterneity emerges not so much from the ground of an Indian authenticity but out of the translational slippage of the colonial encounter.”¹¹ So in the study of modes of resistance generated by elite responses to colonial rule manifested even in the writings and practices of middle-class Bengali *bhadralok*, the manipulation of sign systems and pursuit of a process, we see an acknowledgment of Spivak’s argument of the impossibility of representation for the subaltern. At the same time, however, in the examples represented by “History 2”¹² or acts of “political society,”¹³ there is an attempt to rework the silence or un-iterability into an expression of negation, whose example generates an opacity that serves as a marker of the subaltern and cannot be excluded from discourse.¹⁴ Here, the subaltern does not function as a figure of insurgency but as an

¹¹ Christopher Pinney and Rachel Dwyer, *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics, and Consumption of Public Culture in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

¹³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Considerations on Political Society in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Sudipto Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

interruption through recalcitrance or untranslatability. The recent work of the Subaltern-Popular group has organized around a related set of issues that raises the question of subalterneity with a focus on the popular and popular culture.¹⁵ The categories of incommensurability and untranslatability have become the grounds upon which scholars have put the two categories of subaltern and popular into dialogue with each other to ask:

Is the subaltern primarily a political construct? If we engage the problematic of the popular, how does that extend the frames of the discipline of history? What constitutes evidence in this renewed framework? What are the roles of popular cultural forms, such as popular art, film and music, in addressing and configuring the subaltern? How does one frame the question of faith and religiosity given the collusion of the popular with the state apparatus? What would be the theoretical impact of relaxing the Gramscian assumption that the subaltern is defined by insufficient access to modes of representation?¹⁶

Provoked by these questions, an aesthetics of “failure” focuses on melodrama as a key node of expression for understandings of modernity, ethics, and the relationship of the popular to the public. An aesthetics of “failure” recalls the egalitarian and democratic impulses of modernity, while offering a valuable site for the production of subaltern subjectivity and critique. With an emphasis on an examination of the politics of representation around subaltern figures and a focus on the spectral quality of subaltern citizenship, I examine the various ways in which films and novels imagine the subaltern, as prosthesis¹⁷ or specter,¹⁸ and an object and site of desire. Simultaneously,

¹⁵ See: Subaltern Popular Workshop, “Goals and Objectives,” University of California, Santa Barbara (no date). 25 November 2005 <www.ihc.ucsb.edu/subaltern/goals/goals.htm>.

¹⁶ Swati Chattopadhyay and Bhaskar Sarkar, “Introduction: The Subaltern and the Popular,” *Postcolonial Studies* 8.4 (2005): 357–363.

¹⁷ David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) and Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006).

through melodramatic foregrounding of affective and excessive signification relating to a sense of non-linear temporality as that which cannot be contained within structures of realism, the subaltern figure remains a singularity, an entity, which cannot be wholly represented, interpolated, or translated even as it is brought into relation with inter-subjective configurations. The models of secularism and temporality deriving from these seemingly irrational features proposed by the texts I examine in the dissertation thereby suggest the failure of Enlightenment reason for securing democracy under the shadow of European colonial expansion or in the postcolonial state.

Analogs to the logic of diagnosing and recasting failure for productive ends comprise recent feminist theory sparked by the work on what Judith Butler has called “the productive power of the negative,” and in fact influenced earlier work on the politics of representing subalterneity.¹⁹ In Butler’s foundational work, she argued for a concept of homosexual subject formation predicated on negative or failed (re)constructions as fake or bad copies of heterosexuality; Butler argued for a re-working and destabilization of heterosexuality as the originary or authentic subjective mode. She argued that the repetition of instability, failure, deviation, and excess demonstrated through the performance of said subjectivity, through drag, approximation, or impersonation, would displace compulsory heterosexuality.

More recently, the work of Judith Halberstam and Heather Love on “the antisocial thesis in queer theory” follows Butler but further emphasizes the importance of affect, particularly negative affects, for conceptualizing political

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-century France*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). For an example of how Butler’s work has enabled subaltern scholarship, see: Gyan Prakash, “Becoming a Bhuiyna: Oral Traditions and Contested Domination in Eastern India,” *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, ed. Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1992): 145–174.

problems. Halberstam argues for “counterintuitive” forms of negative knowing through forgetting, failure, and inauthenticity.²⁰ Similarly, Love focuses on the affective power of “backward feelings” such as damage, loss, regret, shame, passivity, and withdrawal, arguing that these affects index the ruined state of the modern social world and show up the inadequacy of progress to make things better.²¹ Likewise Sara Ahmed’s recent work on the “alternative social promise” available in a stance of critical unhappiness oriented around “histories that hurt” enables me to further focus on the importance of affect for focusing on social injustice organized around racial and religious marginalization.²² What is enabling about this related work in postcolonial and feminist theory is that it permits me to acknowledge the gravity of postcolonial conditions in India as a particular case (and elsewhere in general) without foreclosing spaces for considering alternative models of modernity and temporality, perhaps emergent in unlikely and counter-intuitive sites such as popular or public culture. The dialogue ensuing from these developments in scholarship also foreground the new importance ascribed to the role of affect as a concept that relates the individual, social, and political realms in new ways. I seek to extend this work in subaltern studies and feminist and queer theory to consider the role affect plays in the production of secularism via melodrama, the mode whose popularity in India and other “transitional”²³ contexts brings together these concepts in surprising ways.

²⁰ Judith Halberstam, “Notes on Failure,” *Visual Studies*, University of California, Irvine (3 March 2006).

²¹ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²² Sara Ahmed, “The Happiness Turn,” *New Formations* 63 (winter 2007–2008): 7–14.

²³ Ravi S. Vasudevan, “The Politics of Cultural Address in a ‘Transitional’ Cinema: A Case Study of Indian Popular Cinema,” *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (Oxford and New York: Arnold, 2000): 130–164.

Historically linked to the emergence of secularism in the West as a response that filled the vacuum left by the demise of the church and the monarchy,²⁴ melodramatic texts of the 19th century are understood to have served as templates of morality, offering individuals a way of thinking about the implications of acts and consequences of these for their daily lives. With narratives organized around the victory of good over evil, virtue over treachery, and emotion over reason, representations of irrational emotion, exaggerated rhetoric, overly stylized mise-en-scène, and gestures of the female body marked the anxieties produced by the decentering effects of secularism and modernity as well as efforts to make sense of new conditions.²⁵ The contradictory definitions of secularism outlined by the Indian constitution attempt to hold together the universalizing concepts with regard to citizenship and the acknowledgment of difference with regard to diverse communities. If we can argue that the first definition of Indian secularism, *dharmanirapekshata* (indifference to religion) derives explicitly from the Western tradition and colonial legal institutions, perhaps it is possible to say then that the second definition, *sarva dharma sama bhava* (literally equal feeling or emotion for all religion), problematizes the universal aspect of citizenship and national belonging by posing the postcolonial question of difference and its role in constituting relationality. The latter term establishes the primacy of feeling for the definition of the secular. Moreover, melodrama, another related discourse on feeling or emotion, translates in Hindi into *bhavukta* and in Bengali to *bhabprobontapurno*. The definitions of the secular and melodrama both derive from the same Sanskrit root, *bhava*, or emotion, which can be extended to

²⁴ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

²⁵ Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*.

include affect. In the mutual constitution of these discourses, melodrama and secularism, affect becomes the operative means of representing relations across difference.

The affective “turn”

My emphasis on the term affect, by which I mean a state encompassing the body as well as the mind, as opposed to emotions, which fall into the realm of mental phenomena,²⁶ follows changes wrought by globalization prompting the “affective turn,” according to Michael Hardt.²⁷ Scholars from fields such as cultural studies, sociology, women’s studies, and queer studies moved from psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity to emphasis on the organic body in “equilibrium-seeking systems” or “open systems” as constitutive of the social arena. As a result, the materiality of emotions, feelings, and sentiments now informs understandings of social transformation. According to Hardt, this shift draws attention to the importance of the body, but demands a synthesis of reason, evident as actions of the mind, and the body (and passions), what he terms “corporeal reason.” Affects provoke us to “enter the realm of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because the affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers.” (quote unattributed) These new understandings of affect open

²⁶ While the concept of *bhava* has been conventionally linked to feelings of devotion in religious studies scholarship, I use it here in its broadest sense to link similar affective responses provoked by a religious icon such as a temple deity, a calendar art image, and iconic framing of authority figures seen in Indian films. Consider the well-known imagery of Nargis in Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* (1957). See also: K. Asif’s *Mughal-e-azam* (1960, *The Great Mughal*).

²⁷ Michael Hardt, “What are Affects Good For,” forward to *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Clough (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007): ix–xiii.

up the possibility of conceiving of melodrama as an aesthetics of “failure.” Firstly, in terms of temporality, the affective response foregrounds the simultaneity of reception and production—being affected and affecting. The subaltern figure can no longer be conceived of as a mere stereotype or fetish. Rather, the excess of representation that characterizes subalterneity as untranslatability, or interruption in melodramatic terms, can generate an alternative sense of the term secular so that it signifies the persistence of feeling enchantment as a feature of everyday life for billions of people. In the case of an affective representation of religious difference, the expression could not be dismissed merely as social construction, false consciousness, ideology, tradition, or “barbaric.” A secular or worldly understanding of religious difference would concede the production of religious difference as a category of thought emerging from modernity itself.²⁸ The affective representation of subalterneity would produce an ethical sense of secularism and consider what relationality would entail if it went beyond mere tolerance, which in Indian secular policy amounts to Hindu chauvinism.

What sort of ethical understanding would need to exist in order to maintain the singularity of (religious) difference so that an individual could be a citizen as well as Muslim, Sikh, or even a Hindu woman? Hardt proposed a concept of “affective labor” to represent the feminized immaterial labor of love, comfort, or attention that produces surplus value in service economies shaped by post-modernization.²⁹ My use of affect extends this notion of affective labor to take into account the specificity of postcoloniality in the process of economic post-modernization by arguing that the liberalization

²⁸ Amardeep Singh, “World Religions and Media Culture,” *Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture and Politics* 12 (2000): 3–11.

²⁹ Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *boundary 2* 26 (Summer 1999) 89–100.

policies of the Indian state are aimed at the growth of the economy and the emergence of large middle class at the expense of the failures of the nation: “backward classes.” The development of India’s service industry has been projected to become a new and important site for economic growth, but demands a uniformity of labor and a maximum extraction of surplus value in the form of affective labor to succeed. The growth of capital based on India’s neo-liberalization policies depends on not only that the process of producing subjectivity through affective labor be obfuscated, but also that affective value *based on difference* (here religious difference) be used purely in the service of reproducing capital.³⁰ In this case Hinduism stands in as the *de facto* norm. Here Hindutva, or Hindu-ness, moreover, dovetails with the state’s policy of liberalization. Affective responses related to the production of difference therefore can offer themselves as sites of autonomous production, interruption of the growth of capital, and a subversion of the state’s demand for homogeneity.

To argue for the importance of affect in a context where it is necessarily related to the element of the irrationality challenges the project of “making sense” conventionally, as Pratt suggested, since the academy has traditionally claimed to rely on secular and rational critique as the bedrock upon which knowledge and progress are based. Much recent scholarship emerging from cultural studies, and postcolonial and global studies, though distinct, shares this impulse to expose and critique states’ growing ideological and repressive

³⁰ An example of the differences in narrative modes to represent subaltern vs. middle class is seen in recent films, including Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), where the middle class protagonist’s story is developed within a realist framework in keeping with the aesthetics of parallel or non-commercial cinema, whereas the subaltern representation of the Christian maid’s marriage is represented through the conventions of melodrama. Of course, the main narrative of the protagonist is interrupted with the elements of melodrama such as coincidence and repetition thereby demonstrating the reliance of realism on melodrama.

powers and the ensuing uncertainty they unleash by appealing to reason. The implicit hope is that documenting the reality of injustice will result eventually in the implementation of justice. So, for example, whether the works critique those institutions that coerce women into wearing the veil or those that compel them not to, for those that reproduce stereotypical and Orientalizing cartoons of terror-inducing masculinity, or even those who would propagate a neo-imperial presence for the U.S. on the global stage, the desired outcome of analyses is to reveal and dismantle the powers that be. But increasingly, the importance afforded affect encourages us to “recast previous work in a new light.”³¹ As such, the expectation that realist and documentary representation of injustice necessarily results in critique comes under scrutiny.

Consider for example, media representations of the plight of Kausar Bano, former resident of the locality known as Naroda Patia in Ahmadabad, who at the time of the Gujarat violence of 2001, was eight months pregnant and killed by a crowd in a horrific manner. The group slit her body open to extract and burn her fetus. Her father reported having witnessed the act, as did other members of her locality who were subsequently interviewed in relief camps.³² In wake of the violence and confronted with graphic and specific details of the event circulating in public, Uma Bharati cavalierly denied the validity of the media report in parliamentary debates.³³ She voted against a censure of the Gujarat state government primarily responsible for the pogrom

³¹ Hardt, “What are Affects Good For,” ix–xiii.

³² Smita Narula, “Compounding Injustice: The Government’s Failure to Redress Massacres in Gujarat,” *Human Rights Watch* 15. 3 (July 2003): 72 pages. According to the report, the onlooker, named Reshma, also witnessed nine other women suffer similar attacks.

³³ At the time, Bharati was the Union Minister for Sports. The firebrand and controversial nun has also served in the position of Chief Minister in Madhya Pradesh and also formed her own right-wing party in opposition to the BJP whom she argued had conceded too much to the Muslim minority. “Temple Should Be Built through National Consensus: Uma Bharati.” *Rediff* (3 March 2002). 25 May 2008 <www.rediff.com/news/2002/mar/03ayo.htm>.

on the grounds that the media reports were made up and that Kausar Bano did not exist. She asked: “Who is this woman whose stomach was slit and foetus taken out. No one has heard of this woman. She is a fiction created by the media.”³⁴ In other words, bolstering the state’s policy of Hindutva, Bharati disavowed journalists’ reports documenting Kausar Bano’s attack as a fabrication simulated by media detractors whom she attacked for victimizing and sullyng the image of the BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party*, or “Indian People’s Party”). In cases such as these, the efficacy of solely documentary realist accounts rendered these atrocities irrelevant for the state and much of the public whose access to English-language media is limited anyway. This mode is unable to do justice to the subaltern citizen subject whom is often rendered the object of terrible violence.³⁵ The articulation of minority subjection and subjectivity through personal laws and secular laws is impossible to represent only in realist terms.³⁶ In as much as the triumphs of the Indian state and economy stand in as the sole national narrative, these forces can be seen as having generated what Arvind Rajagopal has termed “Hindu national realism,”³⁷ where the myths of the nation function as truth.

³⁴ Flavia Agnes, “The Quest for Justice,” editorial to *Lofty Claims and Muffled Voices*, *Majlis* (2002).

³⁵ Carol Breckenridge, *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota, 1995).

³⁶ The structure of my argument here recalls Spivak’s famous essay and is no doubt influenced by it. At the same time, however, Spivak suggests that Bhuvaneshwari Bhadhuri’s account of her own life must remain silenced if the language of that telling is couched in the terms of colonial discourse. I am trying to suggest that other registers of representation, particularly affective ones, might render speech apparent if still untranslatable. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: 307.

³⁷ Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Melodrama as public culture

What is the substance of “Hindu national realism” that supports the suppression of accounts depicting violence against minorities? The state suppresses what is understood as religious difference in order to secure its sovereignty and consolidate a homogenous labor force to ensure the growth of capital through its policy of *dharmanirapekshata* (separation of state and religion). In order to justify the explicit and violent disavowal of minorities, oppression of gendered and other difference, and the imposition of a single de-facto religious identity, namely masculinist Hindu identity, the state recasts the national narrative by appealing to specific understandings of the *Ramayana*, emphasizing in re-enactments and performances that the state understands itself as the triumphant and teleologically determined endpoint of this myth.³⁸ The brutal acts of communalism foreground the fact that secular ideology espouses an explicitly masculinist and triumphalist account of the Hindu state premised on *Ram Rajya*, or the rule of law governed by a virile and militant “deity turned crusader” Ram. It was precisely this spectacular representation that L.K. Advani, former deputy Prime Minister and head of the BJP, hoped to forward when, bow and arrow in hand, he impersonated Lord Ram during his return from a fourteen-year exile in the forest. The striking tableau was repeatedly staged during the course of the nation-wide *rath yatra* or chariot procession. Art historians have traced the proliferation of iconography surrounding this figure to the popularity of bazaar prints featuring a “muscular, aggressive, and dynamic” image coinciding with agitation by the Hindu right around the *Ramjanmabhoomi*

³⁸ See chapter 2 for further elaboration of this point. Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

movement as it began to gain momentum in the 1980s.³⁹ Of course, these images became a feature of the national popular imagery with the broadcast of Doordarshan's unparalleled series *Ramayana* and seemed also to draw on resonances with depictions of divinity in popular devotional films. An increasingly more violent and viscerally captivating incarnation of this figure has been updated, for example, in a forthcoming video game and animation based on the Virgin comics series, *Ramayana 3392 AD*. Again, the aims of economic liberalism through the development of animation and gaming vis-à-vis the global market⁴⁰ collude with Hindutva ideology: actual state violence such as that enacted on Muslims in Godhra is recast as a multi-player game that draws spectator citizens in to fight a specular enemy.

These representations showcase not only the surge in consumerist desire and goods prompted by India's neoliberalization policies of the late 1990s but also the collusion and success of state and private sector harnessing of cinephilia to further its political and economic aims. In my reading of these current conditions, cinema as a site serves as a confluence and convergence of producers, politics, and publics. I also contend that the site's effects function at least as much through formal elements as through networks of reception as is evinced in the example of Advani's *rath yatra*, an event that would scarcely have had as much meaning had it not been represented in cinematically

³⁹ Ramjanmabhoomi literally means "the birthplace of Ram" and is understood to be located in Ayodhya. Since the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by over 100,000 Hindu extremists who claim the 16th-century mosque was built over Ram's birthplace, the term has come to signify the violent and divisive communal struggle over this contested site.

⁴⁰ The video game is co-produced with Virgin U.S.A. Anustup Basu argues that the fact of digitization transforms the normalization of Hindutva as a process of information rather than representation. Anustup Basu, "Hindutva and Informatic Modernization," *boundary* 35.3 (2008): 239–250. While that is certainly an important and new feature of the urban context of the middle class to which he refers, the uneven quality of media access in India remains, and long-standing representations of what is considered sacred, auspicious, or profane still very much rely on the economy of exchange and circulation of iconic representation. For a discussion of these processes see: Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*.

mediated terms of tableau, iconic framing, and impersonation. If cinephilia has conventionally been understood as an obsessive desire for cinema predicated on the confirmation of individual taste, specialized knowledge, and monitoring of one's knowledge regarding the details of cinema, here I consider the phenomenon as an example of public culture where the emphasis is on collective responses engendered by habits, preferences, and memory deriving from acts of spectatorship.

In part, the state's recourse to "Hindu national realism" and the impossibility of subaltern representation emerge from a kind of logic that justifies the state's brutality on the grounds of "Hindu hurt."⁴¹ Hindu majority groups mobilize around symbols like the contested site of the destroyed Babri mosque or the "Rath Yatra" or chariot-parade staged by L.K. Advani, bow and arrow aloft, in a stance reminiscent of the god Ram in a warrior pose. At stake in these identifications is the fantasy of having inherited a wounded Hindu civilization, failed and destabilized in the past by Muslim and British aggression, but now rising to restore itself to its former pre-modern glory. At the root of state secular policy is the mobilization of this sense of loss and desire for redemption, the instrumentalized channeling of which is facilitated by the outpouring of public sentiment around spectacular acts of violence. These acts can be read as demonstrations of formal excess with the props of violence coding the perpetrators into a modern mythical narrative giving rise to the imagined community of the Hindu nation. The need for bureaucratic realist documentation notwithstanding, the performative and formal aspects of this violence have been overlooked by

⁴¹ Amrita Basu. "Caste and Class: The Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India," *Harvard International Review* 18.3 (1996): 28.

scholars in the effort to counter it by marshalling and documenting facts. It would appear that ideological mythmaking processes do not cease simply because the presses provide statistics and names. In response to the state's fusion of ideology and repression to define secularism, the failure of realist accounts to render justice suggests that any viable formulation of secularism needs to take into consideration the generative property of affect for activating affiliation and action. The dismissal of this kind of activity as spontaneous and mob-like in favor of tolerant detachment coupled with the critical distance necessary for realist understanding seems to set the stage for more of the same.⁴²

In response to the "Hindu national realism" and the ideal-citizen subject privileged by the state's legislation and policy, the aesthetics of "failure" in melodrama, conventionally read as the result of the failure of realist representation to develop in the Indian context, reemploy strategies of failure to stage the production of a spectral-citizen subjectivity mediated by cinematic and performing arts conventions. In this postcolonial context, the specular aspect of the melodramatic film form emphasizes the failure of time as destiny to deliver on promises of the nation, and contests the idea of "Hindu hurt" upon which the state neutralizes subaltern difference. An aesthetics of "failure" makes meaning through a serialized circulation and repetition of images. These interrupt and haunt the linear temporality of state-driven development and progress and its preferred mode of narration, realism, the naturalizing quality of which has the effect of making a cultural

⁴² Amrita Basu, *Violence and Democracy in India* (New York: Seagull Books, 2007).

feature such as religious practice seem essential, or an historical event such as poverty or violence seem teleological.⁴³

In order to examine the value of affect inhered in an aesthetics of “failure” and to consider how aesthetic experience is linked to social and political developments, I draw on the mandate of the journal *Public Culture*, which suggests avenues for thinking between the interstices of the disciplines of cinema studies, literature, and area studies, all of which offer distinct perspectives on the workings of melodrama and all of which cohere in the consideration of melodrama as a mode, whose transnational signification contests territorialized understandings of the nation. A review of scholarship regarding cinema and culture in South Asia reveals the privileging of social scientific methods including ethnography and media studies with much less focus on questions of representation and form.⁴⁴ To better link formal understanding with the effects generated by film and literary forms, the concept of public culture allows scholars to:

interrogate four then-conventionalized set of binaries: tradition and modernity; high and low culture; the humanities and the social sciences; and (less conventionalized) area and cultural studies. The focus on cultural forms of the public might not be a perfect instrument for capturing the global circulation of (cosmopolitan) forms and their overlapping circuits in the late twentieth century. But it captures a

⁴³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

⁴⁴ The study of Indian cinema in the U.S. academy is often just as likely to be situated in area studies or in fields like visual anthropology or sociology where audience or collective responses are often the object of study rather than the film text as is more often the case in Cinema Studies. I have in mind here: Sara Dickey “The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52.2 (1993): 340–372; Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Rajinder Dudrah, *Bollywood: Sociology Goes to the Movies* (New Delhi and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006); Aswin Punatambekar, *Global Bollywood* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), and even Ashis Nandy, *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998) and Ashis Nandy and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Talking India: Conversations with Ashis Nandy* (New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

desire and an intuition that the public and the global are inextricably imbricated in each other.⁴⁵

The concept of public culture offers possibilities for considering how individual responses and collective experiences are mutually constitutive. So, for example, cinephilia frequently reproduces itself as direct political engagement through fan clubs or stardom slips into state sovereignty. Public culture allows us to consider how audience response to cinematic impersonation as stars embody themselves, their film roles and political roles in the press or even at the level of the state transform notions of coincidence and simultaneity, what are otherwise considered failed forms of melodrama, into affective senses of the secular so that spectatorial subjectivity rather than state- determined subject positions are generated. In examining how cinema functions as public culture, I am interested in those studies that contextualize melodrama not only in Indian postcolonial contexts but also those suggestive of melodrama and film as productive of social networks. These studies allow me to extend Brooks' idea of the "melodramatic imagination" at work, that is, as acts, habits or "practices of the imagination." These in turn might offer conceptualizations of community at the level of the public, a category that allows a more careful assessment of what was perceived as popular culture.⁴⁶

Finally, newer understandings of subalterneity are facilitated by the use of public culture as a category. According to Christopher Pinney:

"Subalterneity" has increasingly emerged—particularly in the work of Partha Chatterjee—as a characteristic of supple culture of the colonized which manipulated eclectic signs against the dominant colonial structure. In later subaltern studies, subalterneity emerges not so much from the ground of an Indian authenticity but out of the translational slippage of the colonial encounter. It is in this context that Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge's claim that "public culture" is an

⁴⁵ Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities," *Public Culture* 27 (1999): 1–19.

⁴⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

ally and footnote to subaltern studies, extending that perspective to India considered as a “postcolony” make sense.⁴⁷

The negation of the subaltern is marked in his or her representation as failed citizen or as a negation of citizenship. This representation challenges the terms of realist representation and thus put into crisis the dichotomies relied upon by the state such as law and justice, citizen and specter. This ghostly absence in presence has the same quality that marks his or her spectral cinematic representation. Here we can think of melodrama as an aesthetics of “failure” where the failure signifies subaltern negation, which according to Lloyd emerges as a “ghost of inassimilable set of possible social relations unleashed by their very displacement,”⁴⁸ or, according to Appadurai, is marked by its spectrality.⁴⁹

Subaltern subjectivity as spectral citizenship

The spectral subaltern subject represented through an aesthetics of “failure” arises in response to the militant figure of progress. The state’s power depends on the circulation of this latter figure to consolidate Hindutva as state policy. It gains ideological grounding and public participation by stereotyping minorities and subalterns as “bad copies” and representing them as figures who have no place in the space of the nation, even as they inhabit it. Figures of “failure” or characters assigned the position of failed citizen or “other” disrupt the national narrative and haunt the public. In terms of secular representation, “failure” signifies woman, Muslim, low-caste

⁴⁷ Christopher Pinney and Rachel Dwyer, *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics, and Consumption of Public Culture in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ David Lloyd, “The Subaltern in Motion: Subalternity, the Popular and Irish Working Class History,” *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 8.4 (2005): 421–437.

⁴⁹ Appadurai, Arjun, “Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai,” *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000): 627–651.

individuals and Dalits, those individuals the state translates as “bad copies” of its Hindu masculinist ideal. The focus then on the spectral quality of the line that separates truth from falsity is made apparent through the focus on ghosts and apparitions, which throw our ability to apprehend reality into crisis.

Jeffrey Weinstocks offers a helpful characterization of this process:

[G]hosts are unstable interstitial figures that problematized dichotomous thinking [...] Neither living nor dead, present nor absent, the ghost functions as the paradigmatic deconstructive gesture, the shadowy “third” or trace of an absence that undermines the fixedness of such binary oppositions. As an entity out of place in time, as something from the past that emerges into the present, the phantom calls into question the linearity of history. And as, in philosopher Jacques Derrida’s words in his *Specters of Marx*, the “plus d’un,” simultaneously the “no more one” and the “more than one,” the ghost suggests the complex relationship between the constitution of individual subjectivity and the larger social collective.⁵⁰

The ghost emerges from the past and punctuates the present with an eyewitness account of that which was purposely suppressed. Moreover, much like the concept of subalterneity, which I employ here as a relational term, the figure of the ghost makes visible the spectral line between possibility and impossibility with regard to the construction of reality, that is as a state dependent on the image it projects to claim truth value.

At the same time, the spectral image generates the possibility for subaltern subjectivity. I derive this sense of subaltern spectrality by drawing on the work of Celine Parreñas Shimizu, who formulates a similar sense of cinematic spectrality with regard to the power of stereotypical Asian American images to fix racialized, gendered, and sexed representation over time and also as images that invite response:

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2004): 4.

Spectrality captures the ghostly quality of the effects of these images: they are hard to capture and identify as responsible for causing damage. They do, however, indicate certain fantasies and ideas that constitute common culture. As such, they are the site for the study of identities and ideas seemingly proper to certain groups. Spectrality captures the subjectivities offered in films and theatrical production as both problem and possibility.⁵¹

For Shimizu, spectrality refers to “the economy of images in its relationship to history and social problems.” The film image elicits or even invites the spectator’s projection onto the cinematic screen, thereby fixing meaning such that the representation assumes a material reality, in the form of fantasy or stereotype, whose evanescent quality is difficult to hold onto and only circulates through repetition.⁵² Through the spectator’s response to spectrality, the processes of memory and projection produce an affective response. This spectral condition is reinforced today in the changing spaces of India’s urban centers, where policies of neoliberalization obliterate the already small spaces for visibility and representation afforded subaltern figures and communities. Nonetheless, these communities persist and survive, and the idea of spectral citizenship, expressed through the mode of melodrama, might offer us a way of understanding how perseverance is produced, as well as how it may challenge state narratives which falsely posit a non-existent equality amongst a diverse and unequal citizenry. The attendant logics that undergird these phenomena, namely the element of the irrational and the suspension of disbelief, allow the critique of the state’s use of realist discourse to marginalize its citizens. These same logics are the ones that inform the optics of filmic perception, and allow us here to consider the relation between

⁵¹ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *Making Woman Asian: Racialized Sexuality on Screen and Scene* (Ph.D. dissertation) Modern Thought and Literature, Stanford University (2001) and *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁵² The repetition I have in mind here is through the various circulations of the text: screenings, fan club discourse, specular mimesis, memory, and of course, in this case, fantasy.

filmic specularity, subaltern spectrality, and state secularism. In particular, the importance of filmic perception for understandings of the secular in cinema and also for the imagination as a practice is made evident when one considers one of the elements that ensures the spectrality of the subaltern, namely censorship.

In producing a narrative of militant Muslims who need to be kept in check, the state manages to consolidate its own ideal citizen, the Hindu male subject, and attempts to mask the process of producing subjectivity. Such a logic is evident in the cases of state censorship where one sees the state circumscribing and imposing particular definitions for particular religious communities in the hopes of eliding or disavowing difference. This process is also at work, for example, in responses to film where representations that challenge its own stereotypical ones are censored. This is particularly relevant for my project as two of the texts mentioned in my analysis, *The Satanic Verses*,⁵³ as well as Deepa Mehta's first film *Fire* (1996), the first of a trilogy of which *Earth* (1998) is second, both were censored in India along the grounds that with the *Satanic Verses*, the Muslim community would necessarily be roused to violence by its circulation, and in the case of *Fire*, the Hindu community would. It made the same argument to deny the BBC the right to adapt Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* into a film, a case I discuss in another chapter. The demolishing of theaters screening the film by Hindu extremists was sparked in part by the kinds of attacks Bal Thackeray, head of the Shiv Sena, launched, and arguing that Hindus could not be lesbians, that such a story was "un-Indian" would corrupt Hindu women, asking why couldn't the

⁵³ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1989).

characters have been given Muslim names like Saira, Najma, or Shabana, which is incidentally one of the names of the actors in the film.

Failure in a transnational frame

Finally, in a period of Indian politics where the nation state in particular openly represses minorities and suspends civil rights, the transnational and diasporic perspectives expand the already existing critique of the scholarship of Subaltern Studies and suggest alternative routes of countering state censorship and suppression of free speech. For example, the figure of the Muslim as outsider becomes aligned with the transnational or diasporic Indian subject, such as in the singling out of Deepa Mehta by Bal Thackeray. Mehta's Canadian-Indian split identity becomes associated with the otherness of Muslims in Thackeray's formulation and resembles that of Rushdie, whose transnational and critical focus in *The Satanic Verses* was represented as an outsider's hostility to Islam and prompted extremist Islamic groups to publicly declare himself a believer. These artists' critiques of Hindutva politics on the terrain of gender through melodramatic modes diminish the power of the state's use of spectacle in forwarding a masculinist Hindu ideology.

At the same time, however, these critiques call for the extension and re-evaluation of the purview of Subaltern Studies. For instance, Grewal asserts that the absorption and utilization of postcolonial theory in the U.S. as focused around the work of by the Subaltern Studies Collective or on the South Asian diaspora need to be problematized in their solely extra-U.S. focus. There is a certain fascination with these subjects as exotic, that is, as left-liberal formations of desire that recuperate the object-status of those studied through

absorption into metropolitan and cosmopolitan forms of consumption. She critiques subaltern studies for not having engaged with contemporary transnational formations. Although subaltern studies offer grounded critiques of the nationalist historiography, colonial modernity, Marxist orthodoxy, and forms of knowledge formation, it remains uninformed by the discussion of postmodern nationalism, which requires an understanding of the politics of multiple locations since “cultural and theoretical formations travel and move in relation to economic and political neo-imperialisms.”⁵⁴ The subject positions of characters in novels and films I discuss, particularly those featured in *Fire*, *Earth*, and *The Death of Vishnu* are structured by community, local, and national politics in South Asia but also in the U.S. and refer to the transnational aspect of public culture.

If the first half of the dissertation lays out the theoretical questions prompted by my questions as well the historical contexts relevant for an understanding of secularism and cinema in India, the following chapters examine how the secular and the sacred are constitutive of modernity within a melodramatic mode by focusing on the collision of text and context precipitated by formal elements of narration. “Realism Reconsidered in Deepa Mehta’s *Earth*” argues that the film *Earth* uses melodrama as “failed” realism to represent an alternate production of subjectivity, and in doing so complicates the sense of incomplete modernity and subjectivity that Satyajit Ray and other critics implied in their discussion of the failed realism of Hindi cinema.⁵⁵ Based on Sidhwa’s novel, *Cracking India* (1991), Mehta’s film *Earth*

⁵⁴ Inderpal Grewal, “The Postcolonial, Ethnic Studies, and the Diaspora: the Contexts of Ethnic Immigrant/Migrant Cultural Studies in the US,” *Socialist Review* 24.4 (1994): 51.

⁵⁵ Geeta Kapur, “When Was Modernism in Indian/Third World Art?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.3 (1993): 473–514. This discussion feeds into the state definition of modernity as well.

describes the violent changes engendered by partition in the lives of Lenny and *Ayah*, her nurse. I argue that melodrama's reliance on embodiment, albeit via the representation of disability through the "failing" body of the main character Lenny who suffers from polio, offers conceptions of subjectivity that challenge the state's. Lenny's polio materializes her affective response to those specters who populate her nightmares and waking hours—quartered corpses and mutilated bodies she encounters on the street—thereby bringing the somatic and affective together such that the subjectivity assumed by the state, one of her as a rational citizen subject (i.e., Pakistani minority female), is destabilized by her spectral inter-subjective relation with *Ayah*, who is Hindu. The disruption of official state narrative is stressed more acutely in the film, which is visually able to focus on the course of eroticism and prosthetic reliance between Lenny and *Ayah* that forms this inter-subjectivity. *Earth* is second in Mehta's controversial "Elements" trilogy, the first of which *Fire* was banned and censored amidst much public discussion in the popular press due to its depiction of a same-sex couple, Radha and Sita.⁵⁶ Since Nandita Das portrays both Sita in *Fire* and *Ayah* in *Earth*, Lenny's desire for *Ayah* recalls the relationship between Radha and Sita. Through this inter-textual association of narratives, we are offered a model of inter-subjectivity and relationality ordered around the idea of a libidinal circuit that challenges the state's imposition of a static subject position dependent on heterosexuality and religious sameness. Predicated on a notion of seriality and coming into being through the affective response generated by formal choices such as coincidence and impersonation, an aesthetics of "failure" generates a sense of

⁵⁶ Mehta's recently released *Water* (2005), the final in the series of element-themed films also came under attack for its critique of Hinduism.

secular subjectivity that is spectral, i.e. emerging at the intersection of cinema, public culture, and politics.

The fourth chapter, “A Gash in the ‘Reel’: Spectral Subjects *Midnight’s Children*” focuses on the fear of ekphrastic potential expressed by the Indian state’s censorship of the film adaptation of Rushdie’s celebrated novel. I argue that an aesthetics of “failure” works in *Midnight’s Children* (1980), not only to frame scenes formally through a use of cinematic references, but more importantly to demonstrate that postcolonial subjectivity in the text cannot be solely explained by categories generally describing high art, such as magical realism or postmodernism. I argue instead that the technology and medium of popular film as it constructed the national imaginary, helped to produce a sense of cinematic temporality, a major source of Rushdie’s literary project, which comes to be described by critics solely as magical realism. In part, Rushdie employs the techniques of film to highlight the failures of realist language to represent postcolonial modernity, but through his literary project extends the limits of language to represent the cinematic. The binary that characterizes melodrama is troped in the doubling and mirroring of Saleem, the main character, with his alter ego Shiva, but also splinters through the midnight’s children embodied in him, into a split subjectivity which is repeated in *Satanic Verses*, through the relation between Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha. The character of Shiva, Saleem’s subaltern doppelganger, is the baby with whom he was switched at birth. As a fellow child of midnight endowed with similar magical powers, Shiva haunts Saleem’s imagination, rendering the two ghostly reflections of each other, thereby re-interpreting melodramatic film conventions of impersonation and doubling to emphasize seriality, substitutability, and equivalence within the context of postcolonial

citizenship and questions of relationality along religious lines. The potential actualization of this melodramatic trope—the transformation of a subaltern figure into an elite or of a Hindu into Muslim—so threatened the realist state narrative that the Censor Board demanded suppression of the adaptation of the celebrated novel even before the film was made.

My fifth chapter, “The Failure of Death as the Death of the Secular in Manil Suri’s *The Death of Vishnu*,” examines the licenses and limits of melodrama as an aesthetics of “failure” for imagining secular subjectivity by looking at the demise of Vishnu, a destitute, low-caste, handyman abandoned in the stairwell of a building imagining his death as a god in a Bollywood film. Set in the 1980s in a middle-class neighborhood of Bombay anticipating the economic and social changes of neo-liberal policies, *The Death of Vishnu* (2001) is narrated in parts as a series of flashbacks and memories, and describes Vishnu—putrid and polluting—ignored by his tenant-employers who, while citing the rational secular discourse of Nehru and mystical traditions of Hindu and Muslim unity, fail to mobilize their rational understanding of these discourses to have his corpse cremated. Vishnu, however, in dying imagines himself impersonating the deity of a devotional melodrama, traveling through the urban spaces of Bombay in a way that he never would have been able to as Vishnu the servant. By marshalling his affective response to his life in death to cast himself as a divine subject, Vishnu mobilizes the melodramatic mode to produce an alternative to the oppressed subject position that the failures of state assimilation force upon him. I argue that only in dying is he able to separate himself from the utterly abject position that he has been cast into and imagine a subject position that allows him to subvert and re-cast the narrative imposed on him. This process reveals the limits of rational state secular

discourse, which fails to account for the most marginalized groups in India. Such a marginalized figure must die and reappear as a ghost to live. Again, I stress the spectral quality of Vishnu's status as a citizen subject who slips through the cracks of the state's civic apparatus and is left to die an abject death. His reappearance as a specter, however, through the melodramatic mode structuring his imagination, offers him a way to envision a subjectivity for himself that counters the state's oppressive one.

I conclude with a reflection on the potentials of melodrama as a mode for generating the models of subjectivity and community, which counter those of the state through its focus on failure and the marginalized figure, the subaltern in the new films and novels I examine. To be sure, many melodramatic texts perpetuate and reproduce nationalist and hierarchical ideologies of the state and further marginalize minority interests with a focus on excess and spectacle, especially as they structure neoliberal fantasies of emerging middle class Indians.⁵⁷ On the other hand, I demonstrate that melodrama has the potential for generating sites of subjectivity for challenging those imposed by the state. With an emphasis on the body, particularly through attention to the feminized body, melodrama allows us to examine topics such as subaltern affective responses as a site of subjectivity, which realist accounts offered by the state fail to represent. This site then becomes productive for imagining a community through affect: in this model, relations along an axis of proximity are facilitated through bodily inter-relationality, rather than an axis of sameness, which functions along the lines of critical distance, a necessary element of the realist mode and a marker of bureaucratic

⁵⁷ This is evident in the rise of the family film genre in Indian commercial as well as crossover cinema, and includes films such as: Sooraj Barjatya's *Hum Aapke Hain Hain Kaun* (1994), Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), and Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001).

and legal discourse delimiting the Indian secular citizen subject.⁵⁸ Through this process of affective imagination, the contradiction of the Indian secular state might be dissolved as a need for the maintenance of policed boundaries between individuals from diverse communities diminishes.

⁵⁸ With the changes of neoliberal reforms, physical closeness in the rising urban populations of Mumbai for example, only facilitates axes of proximity that much more.

CHAPTER 2

POSTCOLONIAL MELODRAMA AS AN AESTHETICS OF “FAILURE”

History as a code thus invokes a natural, homogeneous, secular, calendrical time without which the story of human evolution/civilization—a single human history, that is—cannot be told. In other words, the code of the secular calendar that frames historical explanations has this claim built into it: that independent of culture or consciousness, people exist in historical time.¹

Ghosts call our calendars into question [...] The ghost always presents a problem, not merely because it might provoke disbelief, but because it is only admissible insofar as it can be domesticated by a modern concept of time. Modern time consciousness can be characterized as disenchanted (the supernatural has no historical agency); empty (a single universal history includes all events, irrespective of cultural disparity); and homogeneous (history transcends the “singularity” of events, because it exists prior to them). From the standpoint of modern historical consciousness, then, “‘supernatural’ forces can claim no agency in our narratives.”²

In this chapter, I examine how the seemingly failed aspects of melodrama within the context of the temporal understandings such as coincidence and stasis imply and outline the “failed” features of melodrama, which seem to have been responsible for its success. In outlining the general structures of Indian melodrama, I focus first on what constitutes melodrama as an aesthetics of “failure” in contrast to realism in the Indian context; secondly, I discuss how the success of melodrama is due in large measure to the mode’s capacity for creating a cinematic and extra-cinematic space for organizing popular understandings of the secular through tactics of coincidence,

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 16.

² Bliss Cua Lim, “Spectral Times: The Ghost Film as Historical Allegory,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9.2 (2001): 287–329.

impersonation, interruption; thirdly, I examine how renewals and adaptations of archetypes using indigenous aesthetic forms such as *rasa* theory provide us with knowledge regarding the philosophical underpinnings of melodrama; finally, I conclude with an articulation of what might constitute an aesthetics of “failure” in public culture.

Melodrama has long been denigrated as a low form of popular culture with little critical potential as a productive site of new knowledge, not only in Indian scholarship, but in other traditions such as Hollywood.³ As a result, the shift generated by feminist film and television criticism of the last decades recasting melodrama as a productive genre for understanding domestic and private spheres of women is of special importance. The circulation of this scholarship has destabilized the understanding of melodrama as mass culture in favor of theorizations focusing on the persistence and pleasure of popular forms, especially for gendered audiences heretofore ignored.⁴ Crucial to making space for this feminist critique, however, was the prior publication of Peter Brooks’s now canonical text, re-framing melodrama as a mode and locating it within historical and social contexts, thereby extending the purview of the melodramatic rubric beyond its constraining characterization as a mere genre.⁵ Presently, studies of melodrama in postcolonial contexts seem to be oriented towards explaining the mode’s pertinence for explaining the

³ Laura Mulvey, “Melodrama In and Out of the Home,” *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin McCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989); *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute 1987); *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1991).

⁵ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995).

transformations wrought by non-Western examples of modernity in national contexts while relying on prior understandings of feminist scholarship.⁶

The melodramatic imagination is apparent, according to Brooks, when we notice the following in a text: strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme situations and actions; overt villainy; persecution of the good, the final reward of virtue; dark plottings; suspense; reversals of circumstances; and finally an experience of wholeness through monopathic emotion.⁷ Originally an 18th-century form emerging from opera, the mode gained popularity during the French Revolution. According to Brooks, melodrama is most important for marking the modern—the post-sacred era—when secularization diminishes the power of the Church and Monarchy, institutions that had formerly defined the meaning of Sacred. Unable to find truth in dictates of the Church or rule of law under the monarchy, the moral corollaries of the Sacred are newly found in melodrama, a mode that gives the audience access to the “moral occult” underlying all systems of knowledge. While Brooks’s argument concerns melodramatic texts of a particular period and place, his analysis has had far-reaching implications for the study of South Asian texts as well. In the study of popular Hindi film, for example, much groundbreaking scholarship simultaneously relies on Brooks’s

⁶ See, for example: Lila Abu-Lughod. *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Cairo, Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005) and Zhang Zhen, “The Melodrama of Orphanhood: Remapping Postwar Chinese-language Film,” *Cinema Studies Colloquium*, University of Pennsylvania (13 February 2008).

⁷ Brooks argues that the Manichean aspect of melodrama, the view that the world can be understood as split between good and evil, pervades all aspects of social life from the private to the public. So, for example, a soap opera scenario depicting an oil tycoon at battle with a small-time farmer for his plot of land in a U.S.-based television show such as *Dynasty* can bear a disturbing resemblance to the apolitical scenario wherein a U.S. leader attacks a sovereign nation in the name of expanding moral good while simultaneously claiming its resources. *Dynasty*. Esther Shapiro and Richard Shapiro. Aaron Spelling Productions, ABC. 1981–1989.

argument, while fashioning understandings of melodrama particular to the Indian film context.

Extending Brooks's focus on the formal aspects of melodrama and his idea of the individual "melodramatic imagination" at work, I consider consumption and representation of these formal elements as acts, habits, or "practices of the imagination." These practices might offer conceptualizations of community at a public level, a category that allows a more careful assessment of what was perceived as popular culture.⁸ In considering postcolonial melodrama as public culture, I am therefore led to invert Brooks's argument: where Brooks focused on the "moral occult," emerging through the "melodramatic imagination," I reconsider the "melodramatic imagination" at work in the production of ethics. In turn, this line of inquiry helps to understand how cinematic ekphrasis produces its public through an aesthetics of "failure."

If the Nehruvian model of statehood and nation encouraged the production of a secular citizen subject through realist terms, I argue that melodrama as an aesthetics of "failure" repeatedly challenges this individualistic model by forwarding inter-subjective relations as the basis for imagining a community for the nation. This is accomplished through use of coincidence, impersonation, and interruption, to create a text of haunting—tropes that collude to foreground temporality and affect as productive of alternative understandings of modernity and citizenship in a postcolonial secular context. This marks a departure from European melodramatic texts

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

whose focus was on the individual experience, historicized though it may have been in particular cases.

For example, in melodramas running the spectrum of 18th-century opera to contemporary soap operas, conventional uses of melodramatic coincidence most often allow an already formulaic story to be rendered suspenseful, thus blunting the power of the device; repeated unexpected interruptions in melodramas produce the very expectations they were intended to thwart, resulting in the charge of melodrama as a form of failed realism. Examples of coincidence in 19th-century European melodramas, however, originated to offer the uncertain individual a sense of the stability and durability of norms and mores in the midst of tremendous changes heralded by new social and economic conditions.⁹ Coincidence typically appears in the repeated use of the trope of the poor but virtuous hero or heroine, orphaned at an early age or cut off from family connections, who after much confusion and a quest for identity, is ultimately revealed to be the long lost offspring of an aristocrat. At the level of the plot, this process occurs through the process of paying homage to the hero's innocence and virtuous acts, which after overcoming suffering and pain, help the hero triumph over the sinister plottings of the villain. The depiction of the process also puts the audience in touch with fate, now standing in for divine will. With its emphasis on expected endings, melodrama re-established a sense of teleological time and a sense of class and social order, thereby stabilizing the uncertainty unleashed by the loss of the Sacred as it was manifested through the Church and Monarchy, institutions that consolidated class positions with social order. While Indian texts certainly also deploy the mode of melodrama

⁹ Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*.

to mark individual responses to change, I am interested in ways that conventions of an aesthetics of “failure” produced secular or other narratives within the film text and how, in turn, these narratives produced social relations through their circulation as public culture.

The failures of Indian cinema

As mentioned earlier, Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai allude to the role of film as an integral one in public culture. I extend this argument to consider ways that cinema produces its public. In this section, I bring together the rich scholarship of Ravi Vasudevan, Rosie Thomas, and Rachel Dwyer, to examine how cinema has contributed to examples of public culture. If Vasudevan and Thomas offer analyses of film reception as productive of spectatorial subjectivity through an analysis of the formal elements of individual or genres of film, Dwyer offers an Indian popular film history.¹⁰ Underlying all of the scholarship of these three authors is the assertion that, historically, Indian popular film has been disparaged as a failed form: unrealistic in its terms of representation, over-determined with melodramatic characteristics, and homogenous even as it might be characterized as having separate genres. Early studies of Indian cinema have shown, however, that neither expected explanation—melodrama as formulaic, or melodrama as failed—account for its success and ability to re-invent itself. Satyajit Ray and like-minded critics argued that arbitrary and unjustified decisions on the part of filmmakers characterized Indian melodrama.¹¹ This observation simply is

¹⁰ Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2006). In this text, Dwyer focuses on genres of film that are organized under the rubric of films whose subject seems to be religious but, given the immense overlap of genres in any given Hindi popular film, I find her analysis to be very helpful for the consideration of film at large.

¹¹ Ray, Satyajit, *Our Films, Their Films* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1976).

not borne out by the industry's development. In fact, a more nuanced study reveals melodrama as intervening in longstanding and fraught discussions not only on the history of realism as an aesthetic ideal in Indian film and fiction, but also in determining what role reason and rationality play in defining and producing progress and modernity. What seemed initially to be merely a matter of taste reveals itself to be more an anxiety over the representation of time and demand for progress. The predilection for realism in the national debate, I argue, stands in for a desire to be modern while melodramatic, with it emphasis on failure, belatedness, and interruption as a threat to its timely achievement.

In her recent review of post-independence film scholarship, for example, Dwyer remarks upon the seemingly unchanging perspective on Indian cinema as a failed entity despite its tremendous popularity and commercial success in various markets and contexts:

Reading the ICC Evidences, I was struck to find that so much of the discourse around cinema today in India is similar to that of almost a hundred years ago. Why has Indian cinema, which itself changed so much, been trapped by this discourse, which perceives it as *backwards, inferior* to the west, in need of censoring to 'protect' the lower classes, and in financial crisis and so on? Why does it focus on the *failings* rather than the success? Statistics quoted in Shah (1950) show the inexorable rise of cinema in India (1950, Ch. 3), although it remains relatively small in proportion to the population in comparison with the United States and Europe. However, by 1939 cinema was the eighth largest industry in India and the third largest cinema in the world (Shah 1950: 60). It has an audience throughout India, albeit concentrated in the urban centres [*sic*], and was distributed in areas where the Indian diaspora were settled (East Africa, South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Federated Malay States, Iraq and West Indies [Shah 1950: 55]).¹² (*emphasis mine*)

¹² Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 2. The italics are mine. ICC here refers to Indian Cinematograph Committee, which initiated a five-volume report on colonial censorship in India in the 1920s.

While the popularity of these films need not necessarily imply their worth, Dwyer's assessment does raise the fact that a sense of their value or lack thereof lies in their unfavorable comparison to the standard or norm established by the west and Hollywood, in particular. We see in this assessment the need for reconsidering film as public culture rather than as a purely formal text, the study of which necessarily implies a need for comparison wherein Indian cinema emerges as a failed derivative of the Hollywood original. The failure noted by Dwyer emerges in the public and critical perception of cinema, but the point of critique of Indian cinema is launched only in formal terms. The task of assessing Indian cinema in terms of film form as well as circulating material object is complicated by the firmly entrenched historical understandings of Indian popular film's failure.

Vasudevan elaborates on the formal inadequacies perceived by critics of Indian cinema, which included writers such as Satyajit Ray, Kabita Sarkar, and Parthasarthy, who wrote in the 1960s and 1970s. He explains:¹³

This school of criticism, which has proven influential in subsequent mainstream film criticism, arraigned the popular cinema for its derivativeness from American cinema, the melodramatic externality and stereotyping of its characters, and especially for its failure to focus on the psychology of human interaction. In these accounts the spectator of the popular film emerges as an immature, indeed infantile, figure, one bereft of the rationalist imperatives required for the Nehru era's project of national reconstruction.

Vasudevan further lays out these demands for realism in film made by critics, producers, and filmmakers. In the Indian context, Bengali art cinema figured as high culture. Commodity culture was represented in American and indigenous commercial cinema. The critical discussion of the 1940s and 1950s

¹³ Satyajit Ray, "Under Western Eyes," *Sight & Sound* 51.4 (autumn 1982): 269–274; Kabita Sarkar, *Indian Cinema To-day: An Analysis* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1975).

produced by these film critics and makers elevated notions of realism, psychological characterization and restrained performance and, in an unexpected fashion, was echoed in the apologies offered by commercial film makers for their product.

Ray, in particular, criticized melodrama's tendency to externalize conflict in opposition to refined Hollywood's ability to internalize it and represent it through character-oriented "movement" and drama and called for a "strong, simple unidirectional narrative" rather than "convolutions of plot and counterplot" that generally characterize what we know as melodrama. A negative, pejoratively defined outline of the commercial cinema emerges from these accounts. Its negative features can be characterized as follows: a tendency to stasis at the level of narrative and character development; an emphasis on externality, whether of action or character representation; melodramatic (florid, excessive) sentimentality; crude or naïve plot mechanisms such as coincidence, narrative dispersion through arbitrary performance sequences; and unrestrained and over-emotive acting styles.¹⁴

The norm to which Ray implicitly compares Indian cinema emerged in part from Hollywood, where the conventions of continuity editing predominated. As Vasudevan points out, however, drawing on the historiographical and textual analyses of Miriam Hansen and Thomas Elsaesser, the process of suturing spectatorial address necessary for establishing Hollywood cinema's distinguishing characteristic, namely that of "bourgeois address," was a strategy that also occurred at the expense of

¹⁴ Ravi S. Vasudevan, "Addressing the Spectator of a 'Third World' National Cinema: The Bombay 'Social' Film of the 1940s and 1950s," *Screen* 36.4 (winter 1995): 305–324 (57); Ravi S. Vasudevan, "Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture," *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi S. Vasudevan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005): 99–121.

performance and visual culture that preceded films and that had emphasized direct address and production of audience response in order to generate meaning.¹⁵ Vasudevan “provincializes Hollywood,” by comparing the development of realism in Indian cinema to that of Hollywood. The act of historicizing the development in the postcolonial context draws attention to the analogous process at work in the site of the “original” source. This historical process is one that is often forgotten when one establishes Hollywood modes of filming and viewing as norms. In continuity editing patterns, the direct address implied by the matching up or acknowledgment of ethnic particularity was replaced by a process of suturing the spectator into the space of the filmic fiction. The consequence of this formal shift meant that the spectator related to the film increasingly in individuated psychic terms and the social or collective audience address received little importance until it was more or less marginalized, as Vasudevan explains:

The process by which the cinema took over and came to develop its own entertainment space was a process of the formation of a national market in which the spectator had to be addressed in the broadest, non-ethnic, socially universal terms. Of course, what was actually happening was that a dominant white Anglo-Saxon norm came to be projected as universal. Along with this process there developed the guidelines for the construction of a universal spectator placed not in this auditorium but as an imaginary figure enmeshed in the very process of narration.¹⁶

In other words, the privileging of continuity editing in order to consolidate and reproduce a practice of viewing wherein spectatorial consent was

¹⁵ Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Ravi S. Vasudevan, “The Politics of Cultural Address in a “Transitional Cinema”: A Case Study of Indian Popular Cinema,” *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (Oxford and New York: Arnold, 2000): 151.

conceded to identification came at the expense of aesthetic strategies that seemed to invite collective public response. While Hollywood aesthetic frameworks increasingly established these conventions as the groundwork for the realism that generally characterizes U.S. cinema, Indian cinema following Hollywood also adopted some of these codes of continuity editing but purposely persisted in the use of direct address, a feature that willfully marks much popular Indian cinema today. Where critics like Ray and Sarkar saw failure in these hybrid features, Vasudevan argues that these features of direct address in Hindi films were not exceptions or stops on the way to a more realistic film as critics hoped and assumed, but rather the norm, a part of a cultural form which was more complex than these contemporary critics would allow.

Realism in the context of Indian cinema

The relevance of popular culture to studies of culture lies less in figuring Indian cinema's relationship to realism but perhaps more with noting its preoccupation with a particular framing of the body. Vasudevan argues that change is not perceptible or notable when a social historian or cultural theorist operates with preconceived notions of what constitutes change and fixed understandings of contested categories such as realism, which is actually the context that informs the history of aesthetics as they pertain to Indian film:

[F]or popular Indian cinema the categories of public and private and of feudal and modern scopic regimes may not adequately comprehend the subjectivity offered the spectator, and this would in turn have implications for the culture of citizenship. The rupturing of an integral, self-referential narrative space via direct access suggests a circuit of imaginary communication, indeed, a making of audience into imaginary community. The authorising voice of narrative community is not fixed, however.

To complicate Prasad's insight, while speech may be pre-interpreted in the sense that characters do not speak in the register of everyday, naturalist conversation, but are vehicles of existing language systems, cinematic narration subjects these to a reconstitution which enables an inventive, dynamic address to contemporary issues. As I have suggested, the solicitation of the cinema audience into a familiar community of meaning via direct access may afford a certain movement, an outlining of new forms of subjectivity on the grid of the culturally recognisable. We have seen how this works in terms of a transgressive rendering of romance. An overt political address, bearing directly on questions of citizenship and state legitimacy, also emerges in new languages of direct address. The development of a new linguistic nationalist community in the direct address of the Dravida-Munnetra-Kazhagam-influenced Tamil cinema would be an obvious example. In fact, Indian popular cinema has, throughout its history, deployed such modes of address to constitute imaginary political communities, around issues of social reform and nationalist mobilisation. Here, direct address may argue for change on somewhat different grounds than the protocols of narrative continuity, realism, and individual characterization.¹⁷

It is by extending Vasudevan's emphasis on the importance of direct address and frontality I argue that impersonation, interruption, filmic techniques of "failure" (iconic, static, and tableau shots of gestures and of the body) promote the mobilization of cinephilia in the service of collective subjectivization. This process produces a sense of the social and might be politicized—as in the case of Tamil film stars using their screen personas to forward campaign and other political messages—to counter those understandings of secular citizen subject forwarded by the state.

While proponents of Indian New Wave and Parallel Cinema denigrated melodrama as unsophisticated and retrograde, realism, equated as it was with rational, scientific, and historical sensibility, later re-emerged in another form *within* melodrama, a genre which made former versions of realism more accessible to the general public. Ashish Rajadhyaksha describes this process:

¹⁷ Vasudevan, "Politics of Cultural Address," 150.

[T]he primary political battle was assimilated at a secondary level by most of India's commercial cinemas, who in equating realism with certain objectified values and symbols (e.g., of "rationality," "science," or "historicity") also wrought what in retrospect would be the far more significant change in Indian film: the shift from the reformist social (including in this the indigenous mythological and the more borrowed historical), into an idiom of melodrama.¹⁸

Films of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Mehboob Khan's *Andaaz* (1949), Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951), and Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), are results of this shift.¹⁹ Melodrama became a hybrid genre, with aspects of realism such as themes or plots representing pressing social problems, but also affective elements represented through dramatic dialogues, extravagant settings and stylized mise-en-scène which challenge the criteria defining Western realist aesthetics. These films suggest that perhaps melodrama might have actually fulfilled some of the promises of representation betrayed by the realist discourse of the reformist social and the New Wave, which largely failed to be consumed by popular audiences.

The opening scenes of *Mother India*, accompanied by a rousing musical score, for example, presents in an almost Soviet or Griesonian documentary style the emergence of modern technology in village India—shots of tractors, power plants, ploughs, and dams juxtaposed with a tableau shot of Nargis, the film's famed and much-loved star, kissing the soil of the village whose residents revere her as the mother of the nation.²⁰ The radical juxtaposition of Soviet-style low- and high-angle documentary shots of machinery with lyrical accompaniment and iconic shots of Nargis, who is in a later scene compared

¹⁸ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Epic Melodrama," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25–26 (December 1993): 56.

¹⁹ These three films, though distinct in style, are related by their focus on destabilizing class as a determining feature of Indian society.

²⁰ Compare for example the low-angle shots of cranes and tractors with similar shots of masts and sails in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), likely seen by Mehboob, himself a supporter of Soviet-style socialism.

to the goddess Laxmi, bestower of prosperity and fortune, exemplifies the hybridity of the mode wherein melodrama integrates cinematic forms with pre-modern forms of performance, including theater and the archetypes upon which much of it is based.²¹ The continuity of divine authority, as it is ascribed to Nargis, emerges in these iconically framed and frontal shots, conventions originating in pre-modern Indian miniature painting and theater.²² The stress on frontality and spectacle or drama engages the viewer to participate affectively, an otherwise difficult endeavor in the realist register necessary to highlight technology. Realist representation seemed unable to contain these multiple signifying practices of the modern and pre-modern as well as the attendant temporal frames they implied. As a result, an excess of perspectives seems to emerge best in affective terms, the consequences of which is that elements of realism extend into melodrama and these melodramatic films caught the eye of audiences and captured their attention for years on end. *Mother India* was reissued for four decades after its release and, until the privatization of television in the late 1990s, was constantly in distribution.²³

These hybrid conventions alone still do not, however, account for the continuous and overwhelming success of films like *Mother India* or popular

²¹ Gayatri Chatterjee, *Mother India* (London, British Film Institute, 2002; 2008).

²² The convention of *darshan* also organized the aesthetics of film in this period. *Darshan* is best understood here as act of viewing wherein the devotee sees a temple image in the form of a statue or icon but where the devotee is also thought to be seen by the image. When this technique is deployed in Indian cinema, the scene within which it features often stands out in contrast to techniques of eye-line matches and shot-reverse-shot editing patterns which characterize Hollywood continuity editing as premised on an act of voyeurism. *Darshan* is seen in this case as an aesthetic strategy that seeks to draw in the spectator and organize looking as interactive with the image. Originating from the root *drsh* in Sanskrit, the term also means philosophy, which gives the term the connotation of engaging in an involved apprehension and understanding of one's reality, a practice which signifies more knowledge than can be acquired through a glance.

²³ Gayatri Chatterjee, *Mother India* (London, British Film Institute, 2002; 2008).

Indian cinema since its inception. Regularly recurring aspects of postcolonial melodramatic narrative such as themes pertaining to family and social order suggest that unlike the amateurish and undeveloped frameworks suggested by critics such as Ray and Sarkar, the industry follows some fixed rules and reproduces specific norms within which films signify and make meaning. To be sure, Indian popular cinema certainly draws on Hollywood cinema amongst others but Indian melodrama seems to be of a particular variety such that borrowings must be rigorously integrated into a specific context, itself organized by particular expectations. In other words the elements of Indian melodrama have to comply with the logic established by popular Hindi cinema.

Although Hindi films' conventions of "realism" and "acceptability" are somewhat different from the norms of much Western cinema and mythical references are necessary for understanding conventions, it is certainly not the case that just anything is acceptable. 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 films' roots in mythological drama and refer primarily to a film's skill in manipulating the rules of the film's own moral universe rather than indexicality or naturalism. While Thomas explicitly refers to films of the 1970s and 1980s, her characterization still explains much that is misunderstood about Indian cinema today. Because of processes pertaining to audience expectation and industry consensus, she argues:

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 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.

Thus one is more likely to hear accusations of “unbelievability” if codes of, for example, ideal kinship behaviour are ineptly transgressed (i.e. a son kills his mother, or a father knowingly causes his own son to suffer) than if a hero is a superman who single-handedly knocks out a dozen burly henchmen and bursts into song.²⁴

Filmmakers anticipate audience expectations that the film drama will put the universe of firmly understood—and difficult to question—rules into crisis and then resolve it within the moral order, which is not entirely connected to an institution such as a religious body or figure. The transgressions must be either punished or made “acceptable,” by an “appeal to humane justice, a mythological precedent, or a perceptible contradiction within the terms of the moral code itself.”²⁵

Ideas of good and moral understanding are based on respecting kinship ties and obligations—referred to as kinship emotion and generosity of spirit towards family, *dil* (heart) and considered natural to “blood” relationships. Goodness is also demonstrated through restraint, particularly in the stress on a controlled sexuality. Generally this quality resides in the figure of the Mother, argues Thomas, whereas the villain figures evil. Consequently, the figure of the mother cannot be truly villainous. Generally, her love and devotion for her son are unquestionable. She is lauded for her passive acquiescence of fate over generations. Evil is represented by the materialism of the villain, which loosens sexual mores and bonds between family members. His greed for material gains overrides compassion and

²⁴ Rosie Thomas, “Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity,” *Screen* 26.3–4 (May–August 1985): 116–131.

²⁵ Rosie Thomas, “Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality,” *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol Breckenridge (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995).

familial and friendship ties. Pleasure is produced from the image by safely resolving a dangerously broken taboo.

Indeed the success of these films rests on the play of inter-textuality, the allusions of which the filmmakers assume the audiences will understand. Visual and other formal cues refer to popular forms like calendar art or advertisements that draw on film iconography to warn against the evils of engaging in behavior that defies the prescribed roles. But they also operate with the premise that audiences will recall epic stories. Two mythological characters from the epic *Ramayana*—Sita, the devoted wife of Ram, and Raavana, the demon king—underpin the two archetypes that embody melodramatic themes of good and evil. The kidnapping of Sita by Raavana to Lanka is a narrative trope that often serves as the subtext for plots involving characters' departures from India for the West or *vilayat*, which often was represented as a remote and cold place, devoid of emotion.²⁶ These representations in films do not alone shift values and meanings. Rather, melodramatic representations reveal themselves as key nodes in the collective imagination and configure the terms of public debate as evinced by the controversy over *Fire* during which Hindu nationalists objected to naming Nandita Das's character as Sita and Shabana Azmi's as Radha the divine consorts of Rama and Krishna from the Hindu pantheon, when the two women played lovers in the film.²⁷

It is apparent that many of melodrama's privileged topics and methods might in fact preserve the status quo. At the same time, the transformation of some of these elements in style and citation can have the effect of moving a

²⁶ Thomas describes films made mostly from a period prior to liberalization in India, that is before 1991.

²⁷ Ratna Kapur, "Too Hot To Handle: The Cultural Politics of Fire. *Feminist Review*, No. 64, Feminism 2000: One Step beyond? (Spring, 2000): 53-64.

tremendous number of people and affecting change. Films have been innovating and recreating these frameworks in surprising and creative ways. Even as early as the 1950s, in *Mother India*, the character played by Nargis, Radha, the iconic maternal figure kills her own son, Birju, played by Sunil Dutt, to avenge the honor of a village girl. At the same time, this move was undercut by her marriage to Sunil Dutt in real life. Although the characterization of the marriage as incest initially was cause for scandal, the association of her with the iconic figure of Mother India, paved the way for her to establish herself as a national icon as a nominated member of the Rajya Sabha or the Upper House of Parliament. Her association with Dutt propelled him and their daughter into politics where he served in Parliament for five terms and where his daughter continues to do so. Melodrama as an aesthetics of “failure,” rather than as failure *in fact*, provides models for secular understanding through a manipulation of temporality and affect. The following sections examine how the use of melodramatic conventions seems to undo some of the authority, centrality, and triumphal rhetoric of modern Hindutva as it paradoxically stands in for Indian secularism.

A related feature of the industry was the tendency of Muslim leading actors in the 1950s and 1960s to change their names to Hindu names in order to take on central roles of hero or heroine. Vasudevan argues that oral histories might reveal “nothing less than a parallel universe of concealed identities,” even if fan magazines seem to indicate that the public mostly knew their identities.²⁸ Nargis, who did not actually change her name, nonetheless as a Muslim, played the iconic role of mother to the nation in *Mother India*.

²⁸ Vasudevan, “Politics of Cultural Address,” 130–164.

This role, of course, was the defining one of her career and perhaps her personal life as well:

It seems to me no coincidence that in the same year that *Filmindia* carried this dark communal reception of *Barsaat*, in *Andaz*, a film by a Muslim director, Mehboob, Nargis should again be seeking to touch Raj Kapoor's feet, desperate to demonstrate her virtue as a true Hindu wife, and to clear herself of charges of being involved with Dilip Kumar. The image of the star is not just reiterated in this interweaving of on-screen and off-screen narratives; there is an active working out and resolution of the transgressive features that have come to be attached to him or her. For example, speculations about Nargis' family background, and suspicions of her chastity following from her affair with Raj Kapoor, seemed repetitively to feed into and be resolved within a host of films, from *Andaz* to *Bewafa*, *Laajwanti*, and *Mother India*.²⁹

The example of Nargis working out the complications of her affairs on screen demonstrates that the industry facilitated and perhaps even depended upon life imitating art as much as art's function as "an imitation of life" for making melodramatic meaning. In terms of religious identities, it might be argued that, on the one hand, in order to gain screen presence, actors like Nargis abjured their identities under threat of erasure. On the other hand, the traffic between actor as screen icon and actual individual seems to have created an in-between or third space through impersonation where minority difference was negotiated without forcing a definition of one or the other.

How might this interplay between screen and social context or individual and community have worked? Nargis, and a small number of idealized actors of her renown, persona, and corporal bearing, formalized stardom into iconicity. Through their performances, the normativity and stability generally associated with religious identity came undone as a necessarily embodied or essential feature. What is of importance is the fact that these individuals improvised identities in a brief but significant window

²⁹ Vasudevan, "Politics of Cultural Address," 130–164.

that might have marked their difference to their detriment but succeeded instead in aligning the national narrative with none other than their individual screen presence.

Citing the example of Manmohan Desai's *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (1977), a film about three brothers accidentally separated at an early age from their parents and raised by a Hindu, Muslim, and Christian family respectively, Vasudevan describes how difference presented as interruption integrates into narrative representations of community; that is, the film shows how the two simultaneously constitute each other.³⁰ He likens these important but interruptive moments to those occupied by comedic figures. Their emergence and enfoldment into the story is spontaneous much like comedy, though these stars are not at all comical even if they represent themselves as playful or amusing:

Something of a carnivalesque inversion of hierarchies then emerges; the plebian communities acquire an attractive freedom, of personality, bodily disposition, and romantic initiative, posed in marked contrast to the respectable, but also more repressed, Hindu hero of films such as *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*. It is as if the distractive, anarchic aspects normally associated with comic figures had erupted to envelop the narrative world, loosening hierarchies and coherent modes of symbolic social representation.³¹

One of the minoritized figures in this film, superstar Amitabh Bacchan in the role of the irreverent Anthony Gonzalves, is framed so that his body, gesture,

³⁰ It should be known that *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* was a hugely famous film that focused on secularism explicitly and in many ways obviously, a feature to which the film's protagonists' names attest. At the same time, however, it used tropes of double vision, impersonation, and mistaken identity to make a case for secular ties as productive of ethical relations between members of different religious communities in the manner of kinship ties. In the case of Jenny, played by Parveen Babi, who pairs up with Anthony, her blood ties to her biological father are severed when her later adoptive uncle kidnaps her. At the close of the film, the relations established through affect supersede those of biological family even as the biological family is re-united. The film suggests that this reunion would not have occurred but for the fact that each of the brothers extended himself along ties of affection and regard.

³¹ Vasudevan, "Politics of Cultural Address," 158.

and persona, those aspects that set him apart from the mise-en-scène, are foregrounded. At the same time, the pause provided by these interruptive framing methods offers a space for difference. The shift to faster editing patterns that follow establish a seamless and sequential temporal quality through continuity editing and halt Amitabh's character from standing in for absolute difference.

The characters of Anthony and later Akbar, the Muslim brother, become emblematic of their respective religious communities, thereby losing their individual difference. This is simultaneously beneficial and threatening as far as the state is concerned. On the one hand, the diffusion of absolute difference pacifies the integrationist elements of state policy. On the other hand, the suggestion of community based on religious difference within the nation, that is the Christian or Muslim communities in the case of *Amar*, *Akbar*, *Anthony*, provides a sufficient problem for the concept of India as a Hindu nation.

The film introduces this problem through a stock melodramatic trope: children of unknown parentage find themselves unwittingly abandoned by their father in a park under a statue of Gandhi, "the father of the nation," as he evades the police who have mistakenly identified him as a thief in the place of his employer, the villain. The mother, Bharati, played by Nirupa Roy, having succumbed to tuberculosis, leaves the family so as not to drain their paltry resources. In the process she has an accident and goes blind. Meanwhile, in the park, the brothers are separated from each other. A Hindu policeman who finds him lying on the edge of the road takes in the eldest. A priest rescues the second on the steps of a church and a Muslim tailor rescues the third. The

three are raised in the faiths of their adoptive parents and take on these religious identities.

Subsequently, their mother has a car accident near the church where the now-adult Anthony lives, and he brings her to the hospital. Amar, now a policeman, is called to the hospital to investigate, and Akbar, a musician, uses the excuse of a medical infirmity to gain an audience with the female doctor, Dr. Salma Ali, his sweetheart played by Neetu Singh,³² whose over-protective father prohibits their meetings. By chance, the three of them are able to donate blood to their unknown mother. After this incident, their paths intersect and they become friends with each other and adopt a filial relation to their mother whose ongoing gratitude occasions multiple meetings.

Separated initially as a result of their mother's blindness, the family is reunited after their mother regains her sight. Members of the villain's party, originally responsible for the family's poverty, recognize Bharati and attempt to pursue her. Running for her life, she finds herself drawn in the direction of the shrine of Sai Baba, a saint revered by Hindu and Muslim followers, and who has inspired her long-lost son, Akbar, to lead a crowd of devotees in singing a *quawaali* in praise of Sai Baba's syncretic teachings.³³ As she follows the sound of his voice and nears the shrine, she evades her pursuants. She feels beams of light emanate from the eyes of the statue of Sai Baba. She crawls to the altar while listening to the sound of her son's voice; his words conjure up an image of her children beckoning to her as if they were being screened onto the saint's face: her sight is restored.

³² The two married in real life two years later.

³³ Deriving from Sufism's emphasis on a personal experience of divinity, *quawaali* is a devotional expressive musical form that expresses an experience of ecstasy associated with the union of devotee and deity. Sung at shrines of Sufi saints all over the subcontinent, but particularly in the Northwest, *quawaali* is dominated by Urdu and Punjabi compositions.

One reading of the film might suggest a too easy collusion of Indian popular cinema's with religious nationalism and all those elements decreed as failures of Indian aesthetic appreciation: unreason, superstition, and illogic. On the other hand, the scene starkly marks and deploys those very "failed" conventions of cinema to construct what I would argue is actually a secular moment. Rather than focus on the event as a "miracle" of divine intervention, I would argue that it is the inter-subjective relations between Bharati and Amar, Akbar, and Anthony, who are—unbeknownst to them all—her sons, but more importantly, nodes of secular understanding predicated on mutual affective rather than blood ties. As Bharati navigates the hilly and wooded area surrounding the shrine, the camera begins to cover this landscape in an uneven fashion: it uses low-angle shots and tilts to convey her experience of the bumpy terrain and slowly recedes to include more of the background and the villains on her trail. The progression of the chase is contrasted to the singing of the shrine and a series of parallel editing sequences follow, cutting between Radha, Akbar, the villains, and Sai Baba.

It is the pull of these affective ties rather than those of kinship or divine will that attract Bharati to Akbar's song and affect the consequences of the chase. As their pursuit progresses, the villains are repelled by a serpent obstructing their path when Bharati is drawn in by the fervor of Akbar's song. Though his song is devotional, the expressive rendering of his praise and joy for Sai Baba's protection recalls the kind of faith and ethical sense exhibited by his adoptive father and which led him to pick an unknown child up from the street, save his life, and raise him as his son. The scene represents Akbar as embodying his religious identity affectively and collectively. It is possible to also read his song therefore as an expression of affirmation and gratitude for

these sorts of ethical ties that relate individuals across difference such as Hindus *and* Muslims, rather than as a religious community related by common beliefs. These are the same sorts of ethical principles that are popularly understood to have been espoused by Sai Baba.

Furthermore, in as much as Akbar and Bharathi's experiences are likened, it would seem that the film stresses the corporeality of these affective responses in order to show the relationship between affect and its materiality in producing action. This is established in the transferring of Sai Baba's authority onto Akbar via the repetition of iconic framing and eye-line matches between the statue and Akbar that seem to relate the two as locations along a circuit of energy. Bharati is touched therefore not only by the power of Sai Baba but in fact by the power of Akbar as well. Lastly, the sequence of unsteady shots combined with the frontal address of the statue attempt also to draw the spectator into a corporal spectatorial experience just as the song draws Bharati. Rather than merely witness the restoration of sight, the address of the screen subjects provokes the spectator to experience Bharati's circuitous and dangerous journey via an unsteady camera that is then benevolently anchored by the static shots of Sai Baba and Akbar. The movement of the camera between these scenes serves not only to provide an aspect of the action plot but also serves to undo the religious authority conventionally ascribed to saints and leaders in the Hindu hierarchy as well as to the Hindu state. This religious authority is displaced onto Akbar whose affective expressions inspire Bharathi's restored vision as well as the spontaneous alighting of oil lamps in his midst. What might have been understood as miraculous is here represented as material; Sai Baba's authority

is attributed to Akbar as the agent of affective desire for ethical coexistence and well-being for individuals across communities.

***Rasa* and the ethical secular subject of melodrama**

I cite this example of seemingly sacred intervention in the configuration of secularism in *Amar Akbar Anthony* to segue into an analysis of how formal aspects of “failure” suggest or might promote models of community and inter-subjectivity through theories of *rasa* and affect, especially as they are invoked through representations of seemingly sacred images and/or framing conventions. While methods of Hollywood movement-oriented direction and features of frontal and static framing influenced in part by Parsi theatre,³⁴ itself influenced by British theatrical melodrama of the 19th century, are certainly present in the films analyzed so far, simultaneously, the invocation of pre-modern texts also invoke the attendant poetics of *rasa* theory, an overlooked aspect of theories of affect in postcolonial Indian production.³⁵ The hallmark strategies of “failure,” iconic, static, and tableau

³⁴ Somnath Gupt and Kathryn Hansen, *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Seagull, 2005).

³⁵ I raise the issue of *rasa* theory advisedly, with an awareness of the potential neo-Orientalizing moves that such an argument might enable. The inclusion of *rasa* theory in a discussion on the production of modernity needs always to proceed historically with an eye to whether Hindu nationalist groups might appropriate one’s work for their own projects that call for the “revival” of Hindu culture, often represented as having roots in Sanskrit and the aesthetics of Sanskrit cultural production. My project refuses such an appropriation. Including *rasa* in a discussion of modernity without contextualizing its use also risks essentializing all Indian aesthetic production as if it is organized around affect, and forwarding the view that Indian aesthetic production can only necessarily be understood through native or indigenous categories, a view I refuse as well. I bring up *rasa* theory in relation to melodrama while being attentive to the fact that cultural production in colonial and post-colonial contexts is necessarily hybrid but that more importantly cultural specificity might enable readings and understandings of texts that would otherwise be foreclosed or fail to locate potentials for re-conceptualizations of subjectivity in light of current politics. The inclusion of *rasa* in a discussion of the aesthetics of melodrama seems crucial not only because it is ultimately itself a discourse on the nature of reality, but also apart from that focus, it provides an explanation of the workings of affect in constructing subjectivity and blurring the line between a text and its viewer.

shots of gestures and the body, suggest the reference to earlier visual forms may also serve as inter-texts in films, namely miniature paintings as well as Indian dance and theatre forms.³⁶ These rely on understandings of *rasa*, based on the framing of moods or modes of affect in movement and performance. My interest is less in how theories of *rasa* affect film, however. In terms of understanding the nexus of film text and public, it would be more helpful to explore how film form and cinema as public culture reframe *rasa* in the making of modernity through mediascapes, including literature through a process of exphrasis. Where Ray and Sarkar saw interruption by these pre-modern aesthetics as failure, perhaps the ongoing cinephilia inspired by popular Hindi cinema suggests another direction for the course of study, not where past pre-modern aesthetic forms disrupt linear progression of narrative continuity,³⁷ but rather that film form and technology reconfigure aesthetics of *rasa* to produce new publics, an element of melodrama and affect that has been missing in the attention directed to failure, rather than “failure” with regard to Indian melodrama.

In this section, I explore how understandings of the aesthetics of *rasa* might help to explain the potentials indicated by these conventions of “failure”, i.e., iconic framing, frontality, and direct address in particular.³⁸ At

³⁶ Kathryn Hansen, *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1991).

³⁷ Ashis Nandy, “Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum’s Eye View of Politics,” *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). This is the type of argument that Ashis Nandy suggests in his valorization of “anti-modern” communities. My formulation endorses neither an idealization nor a positing of an originary lost past.

³⁸ A quick description of the theory of *rasa* is impossible and necessarily incomplete since Sanskrit scholars continue to explicate its history and uses today. Frequently, it is the state of aesthetic appreciation into which an audience is put and applies to all forms of artistic activity but privileges drama and performance. They are: sexual passion, humor, sorrow, anger, perseverance, fear, disillusion, amazement, and calm. The *rasa* is the awakening of these impressions, and it is the aesthetic representation and experience that make these events possible. It is crucial to point out that in the aesthetic experience, events are themselves

stake in understandings of *rasa*, I argue, is a sense of the social as it is configured by the aesthetic convention. In this analysis, I consider the modern devotional film form and its foundations in *bhakti* traditions of poetry and visual iconography to argue that cinematic evocation of divine figures and religious personages achieves a sense of affective authority akin to the sacred by virtue of the way the camera calls attention to the interruptive and static moments of framing the subject, thereby rendering it secular.

Indeed, anti-colonial sentiment invoked by the devotional films of Phalke and Damle, pioneers of Indian cinema, premised itself precisely on this kind of spectatorial understanding. It is also this kind of arrangement of sign and spectator that Bhakti poets drew on when they produced a new access to the concept of divinity by way of erotics. Films like Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) and Vishnupant Govind Damle and Sheikh Fattela's *Sant Tukaram* (1936) used the mythological film form to launch anti-colonial critiques in a period of censorship under British rule. Using the characters and themes of pre-modern history and *bhakti* saints' lives, Phalke manipulated the resistant and critical edge of *bhakti's* discourse to fashion an anti-colonial and nationalist public. Through the representation of these conventions of loss, separation, and desire, the poetry was able to provide a sense of community for those previously marginalized by caste and religious hierarchies. This is why perhaps mythological films are central to

unreal. They are understood as paradigmatic and not meaningful individually. The importance of the experience of *rasa* is lost if we think of it as mere emotion or sentimentality, aspects of literary and artistic production with which we are familiar. It is in fact a goal of aesthetic experience. Dimock's easy association of emotion and affect belie an understanding of the two as synonymous while in my definition, affective responses imply a cognitive response while an emotional response does not. Edward C. Dimock, *The Literatures of India: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

melodramatic narratives and tropes in the Indian context. Thomas points to the fact that the stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the sub-text of Hindi film plots.³⁹ Such a process is enabled by the fact that there are multiple aesthetic processes and modes of reading, which are motivating this practice.

In drawing on Bhakti representations of the sacred, cinematic representations foreground the reformist edge of the movement and the many texts—oral, written, performative—that were responsible for its wide dissemination across the subcontinent. The devotional films, such as Vijay Sharma's *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975) and Vijay Sharma's *Gopal Krishna* (1979), differ in aesthetic orientations and provide less of a sharp indictment of inequality, but nonetheless, even in the private and individual cinematic representation of new-found relationality between devotee and deity and the circulation of Bhakti's message of equality between castes through popular messages such as Gandhi's, the devotional genre uses the film form and conventions of popular religiosity to invent a tradition that can only be understood as secular and not backward as suggested by members of IPTA and SAHMAT.⁴⁰ Dwyer explains the in-between status of *bhakti*:

Bhakti historically exists in a dynamic hybrid form between high and low. Its opposition to orthodoxy—views of caste, gender and ideas of god—often marks it as radical [...] However, during the freedom struggle, religion, in particular the approach of *bhakti*, was regarded as part of Indian history and culture in ways that had a powerful impact on the devotional film. M.K. "Mahatma" Gandhi (1869-1948), regarded as the father of the nation, practiced his "experiments with truth," which are closely aligned to *bhakti*, in his everyday life and politics. This connection between Gandhi and his politics was an

³⁹ These are also the subtext of digital media forms such as video games or animated films made for children. See, for example: Sahara India Pariwar's *Hanuman* (2005), Hyderabad-based Greengold's *Vikram aur Betaal* (2005), Koffee Break Picture's *My Friend Ganesha* (2007), Mandalay Pictures' forthcoming *Ramayana 3392 AD* (2011).

⁴⁰ See chapter 2 for the history of IPTA and SAHMAT.

essential part of the popularity of the devotional film during the pre-independence period [...]⁴¹

Dwyer does mitigate her emphasis of *bhakti* by stating that “the glorification of its revolutionary nature and its power as a social movement have often been overplayed,” but nonetheless cites it as an important node of popular culture.

While it is impossible to ascertain through ethnographic or sociological analysis what sorts of groups constituted the public of these films, it is possible to read the film itself for the kinds of audience response or construction of publics the film might have sought. Describing a scene of worship in *Sant Tukaram*, a Marathi Bhakti saint, Geeta Kapur explains the circuit of affective response generated by cinematic conventions of editing and manipulation of aesthetic representations of relationality between subject and object as secular. Describing what might appear to be a scene of prayer, Geeta Kapur analyzes an important scene from the film *Sant Tukaram*, where spectator, saint, and cinematic god align to produce a social and public space of relating. That is to say, the scene represents:

[H]ow religious iconicity is mediated to secular effect in the filmic process. Repeated over the shoulder shots of the devotee first put god and the viewer in contact. But even as Tukaram the saint adores the black-faced Vithoba and witnesses his miracles in wonder the cinematic image is construed to symmetrically reverse the gaze: the saint turns around to let the viewer “adore” him and witness his sublime speech and song. It is his generosity of address towards all phenomena, real and divine and, with it the alertness and dignity of sacred protocol, that help the film in transmitting a non-voyeuristic gaze to the viewer. But if in this performative about-turn there is a transfer of affect between god, saint and viewer conducted through the very body of the saint, there is also a cinematic rhythm in the reversed gaze which makes for reciprocity, an inter-subjective truth-effect that is ultimately secular.⁴²

⁴¹ Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*: 68.

⁴² Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000): 239.

Here, we get some sense of intended audience response or configuration of the public through the spectatorial address implied in aesthetic conventions. The mediation of iconicity represented by the deity and the saint, a seemingly religious process, is transformed through cinematic mediation into a secular moment. The circuit of inter-subjective relations provoked by the film's aesthetic invocation of spectator to sign suggests an interactive relay where the audience, already familiar with the narrative, actively refigures the elements of the scene—dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, setting, pacing, etc.—to engage the representation. The importance of this process is two-fold and related: the authority of the icon shifts from deity to screen figure to spectator thereby opening up where authority is situated, a shift that necessarily implies a destabilizing of the sovereignty of the sacred as the spectator actively negotiates the scene on the screen or in public space. What is also of importance here is the description of a process of apprehension of reality that seems to assume a coherence of intellectual faculties—intuition, cognition, affect, judgment—so that a distinction between reason and unreason does not seem necessarily to hold.

If what we perceive as plot/reason and affect/unreason, both unfold together and do not call for distinctions, many crucial questions arise with potential responses regarding the theorization of subjectivity. While the scholarship on *rasa* has overwhelmingly focused on its significance for the aesthetic and theological perceptions of divine/devotional art, I am interested in those aspects of the theory—performative, artistic, musical, literary, neurobiological, psychological, philosophical—that have essentially been silenced by the focus on theological and devotional understandings. Tracking the understanding of the term historically reveals that, as a

conceptual node, the term brings together semantic, aesthetic, and social concerns. In short, I argue that works of art deploy melodramatic formal strategies of address and identification and thereby suggest modes of sociality and encourage or limit the imagination of social relations. This is particularly potent in melodrama with its focus on affect and performance.⁴³ The “failed” formal codes of film and their corresponding ekphrastic expression in literature, through direct address, supposes a certain amount of social and public knowledge in order to render the film meaningful. In the relay between form and figure, either screen or spectatorial, a sense of intersubjectivity and sociality extends the film experience more broadly into the realm of public culture.

If *rasa* is understood as the apprehension of emotion wherein awareness and absorption converge to produce a unity of text and reader, provoking a sense of heightened and transformative awareness, emotional perception, and release, this formulation has tremendous implications for understanding practices of the imagination in a cinematic context. The mode of understanding initially prescribed by theorists of *rasa* was predicated on a model of poetry that was read or recited. The circuit of spectator and cinematic sign generated by the cinematic experience implies the possibility of extension of a circuit of intersubjectivity proposed by the properly *rasa*-influenced text. It implies the possibility for movement and collective understanding beyond what is generally thought of when we think of cinematic understanding. In a cinematic space, be it a multiplex or a village square, the convergence of totality of one’s mental and emotional

⁴³ Sheldon Pollock, “Bhoja’s *Sringara* and the Problem of *Rasa*: A Historical Introduction and Annotated Translation.” *Asiatische Studien/Études asiatiques* 70.1 (1998): 117–192; Sheldon Pollock, “The Social Aesthetic and Sanskrit Literary Theory,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29 (2001): 197–229.

faculties may lead to an awareness of otherness—in the form of screen or spectator—that is intrinsic to one's own understanding of self, in other words, an ethical sense.

Conclusion: "Time and again"

In conclusion, an aesthetics of "failure" in Indian cinema radically recasts the failed elements of melodrama such as the device of filmic melodramatic coincidence. Typically, read in cultural criticism as a sign of failed realism because of its contrived quality, Indian cinema appropriates this mode so that anxieties over questions of virtue and class are translated into ways of conceptualizing an idealized citizenry, suitable as subjects belonging to a Hindu nation. The resolution of instability through a focus on teleology and linear progressive time meant to ensure a prescribed ending is replaced with the suggestion of subjunctive temporality; rather than depict what does happen, postcolonial melodrama foregrounds the hoped-for ending or what might have happened. As marker of missed opportunity, coincidence becomes linked to the anxiety over national origins and racial authenticity. It is in this suggestion that tactics of "failure," such as stasis as it is represented in techniques of direct address, frontality, and iconic framing, highlight key moments of coincidence, haunting, and impersonation in cinema.

Melodramatic logic also permeates postcolonial understanding not only in film but also as ekphrasis in literary and other cultural terms, registering affect on different parts of the spectrum of public culture. In literary terms, what appears to be magical or irrational such as the multitude of one thousand and one "midnight's children" articulating a collective

vision through the singular narrator, Saleem, in the work of Rushdie or of the servant, Vishnu, flying to the public places of Bombay as a ghost in order to gain access to areas formerly off limits to him as a low-caste in Suri's novel, in the context of the subjunctive mode can be better understood as an effort to hold coincidental outcomes or multiple possibilities in one non-realist representation. Melodrama, particularly filmic melodrama, pervades literature in ekphrastic terms, making for non-realist literary language that references the cinematic as "magical."

Moreover, the temporality suggested by the trope of coincidence, namely the subjunctive mode, pushes the reader or spectator to imagine alternative scenarios or endings for events. The hold of realist, teleological, and fixed state accounts is thereby loosened. If the progressive and linear temporality of realism represents a sense of the past perfected by its then projected future—i.e., the present time of the Hindu nation—then melodramatic coincidence, an irrational understanding of temporality that appears as a failure of realism, and disrupts the mode of linear time and causality that realist point of views assume. Melodramatic accounts cast historical events in subjunctive and conditional modes where realist accounts refer to the past perfect. In contrast, melodrama's subjunctive mode of time suggests histories that *might have* transpired with the fulfillment of a hope or aspiration in place of the present condition. As such, the trope of coincidence provokes a comparison of two seemingly unrelated events, individuals, or groups (such as elites and subalterns) and relates them in unexpected and surprising ways, thereby initiating a line of thinking wherein one outcome might ostensibly have been replaced by another but for a matter of chance or the state's intervention.

By using the trope of coincidence to suggest the substitution of one for another, questions of legitimacy and authority become un-tethered from bloodlines and parentage. The assumptions of veracity underlying the Indian state's conflation of nation and origin and subsequent circumscription of its imagined ideal citizen as Hindu male is undermined by the process of doubling, substitution, and impersonation engendered by the convention of coincidence. In many cases, however, unlike 18th- and 19th-century melodramas, the restoration of kinship ties in the postcolonial case results not in the re-establishment of former social networks, but foregrounds the seriality and equality of citizenship across religious and racial difference suggested by impersonation. In other words, the "bad copy" puts into question the authenticity of the "original"; the minoritized Muslim character can stand in as an ideal citizen just as much as an ideal Hindu character as demonstrated by Nargis in *Mother India*.

Far from being failures of the text, these moments of coincidence and interruption are signs of potential understanding in an affective register. More precisely, considering melodrama in relation to *rasa* as a form of "corporetics,"⁴⁴ or an immediate visceral and aesthetic moment of knowing, facilitates the focus on formal elements generating spectatorial response. Unlike the mostly cognitive understanding implied by realist narrative representation, an aesthetics of "failure," I argue, suggests ways of organizing multiple faculties—intuition, emotion, feeling, corporeity among others—so that spectatorial engagement might not remain purely at the level

⁴⁴ Christopher Pinney, "Introduction," *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, ed. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney (New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

of cognition but like Barthes' *punctum*⁴⁵ and Benjamin's synaesthesia,⁴⁶ might result in active and social participation predicated on sensory and affective circuits of communication and bodily responses.

⁴⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Hill and Wang, 1982).

⁴⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October: The Second Decade, 1986–1996*, ed. Rosalind E. Krauss, Annette Michelson, Yves-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998): 375–413.

CHAPTER 3
REALISM RECONSIDERED
IN DEEPA MEHTA'S *EARTH*

Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998), a film focused on the legacy of partition in the subcontinent, was India's official Oscar Awards entry in 1998. Set in Lahore in 1947, the story is narrated by young Lenny, a precocious young girl whose experience of polio sensitizes her to the changes in her midst. Foregrounding the pre-partition prior friendship and secular coexistence of characters of different religious backgrounds—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee, and Christian—all of whom flock around her Hindu *Ayah*, Shanta, Lenny's startling recognition of the failures of the emergent postcolonial state and the loss of potential communities offers a striking contrast to initial affective and corporeal engagements that give way to violence at the time of partition and independence.¹

This chapter explores ways that Mehta's melodramatic adaptation works to avoid the Indian state's censoring gaze, thereby ensuring the film's successful circulation, while simultaneously initiating a critique of the state's failed secular policy. Upon first glance, state recognition of Mehta's work might seem to support the argument that melodrama is too easily directed onto the body politic as nationalist ideology. On closer inspection of pre-Independence networks, however, an analysis of *Earth* demonstrates that this

¹ Although Shanta's character is mostly referred to as "Ayah" in the novel, underscoring Lenny's point of view as central, I argue that the film seems to stress their interdependence, thereby offering Shanta's point of view more weight. This point is supported by the fact that she is actually called by her name in dialogue, rather than being referred to through her function in the household, as *Ayah* or nurse. Although the point I want to stress is that the film's subversion of the novel affords this marginalized character a more full subject position, I refer to her as *Ayah* for clarity.

adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa's realist novel *Cracking India* (1991) exploits conventions of melodrama such as simultaneity, multiple temporalities, reversal, and doubling—conventions typically regarded as failures of realism—to demonstrate that the logic of reason provides no secular safeguard. Through this process, *Earth* presents an alternative ethical model to the intolerant secular policy touted by the state.²

Whereas the state's promotion of *Earth* would prove to be even more paradoxical when one recalls the controversies generated by the other two films in Mehta's *Elements* trilogy, *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005), these examples of postcolonial melodrama suggest that the work of affect exceeds the state's control and can be subversively re-channeled to offer an understanding of secularism as inter-subjective. *Earth* foregrounds the simultaneous and shared embodiment of affective states by various characters, thereby highlighting relations of self to other within the context of partition and Independence. The focus on disability and heightened sense of corporeal experience—both painful and pleasurable—provokes a rethinking of relationality as necessarily predetermined between autonomous and discrete individuals, who undergo a process of being marked by the emergent states of India and Pakistan as Hindu and Muslim. Instead, this inter-subjective model emphasizes a circuit of affective interactions. The film represents Lenny's experience with her disability as a heightening of her sense of her own embodiment, pain, and relationships with others. At the same time, attention to the representation of desire through the circuits that relate Shanta, Lenny, and the others—whether through reversals and doublings, or alternate forms of subjectivity and relationality—are suggested in lieu of identitarian politics and violence that

² Bapsi Sidhwa, *Cracking India*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Press, 1991).

have constituted secularism in South Asia to date. This emphasis on the pain of the other, as necessarily constitutive of the self, locates the ethical, rather than the identitarian, as a source of one's potential. This sense of inter-subjectivity is missing in India's debate on secularism, which until now seems to serve as means for asserting state sovereignty rather than imagining a community.

Partition violence as pain and prosthesis

Narrated by the voiceover of an adult Lenny and told in flashbacks at the time of her childhood, which coincided with the partition and independence of India and Pakistan, *Earth* explores the body as a central organizing motif to explore the affective generation of secular subjectivity. The focus on visual pleasure and labor provided by the body of *Ayah* highlights her physicality to the extent that her actual name, Shanta, is used only once. Deeply attached to and dependent upon her, Lenny relies on *Ayah* to ease the pain of polio. Lenny's limp and need for support, both physical and emotional, binds her to *Ayah's* body as though it were a prosthesis or phantom limb. As Lenny matures in the midst of the violence of partition and the changing state of relations between *Ayah's* group of diverse friends, she notices ways that her own access to proximity of and desire for *Ayah's* body is mirrored in the actions and desires of *Ayah's* male admirers, who are drawn to her "like a moth to a flame."

Mehta's film goes to great lengths to depict the ways in which *Ayah's* body often becomes an extension of Lenny's disabled body, acting at times as a conduit through which *Ayah's* own physical and emotional experiences are simultaneously transmitted to Lenny, particularly at times when *Ayah*

physically carries Lenny in her arms or supports her at her side. Not only does Lenny's sense of self emerge through *Ayah's* physical experiences—whether *Ayah* is defined as a woman surrounded by a group of male admirers for whom she serves as an object of desire, or whether she is defined as a Hindu surrounded by a group of Muslims—Lenny becomes aware of the political realities emerging around her through *Ayah's* friendships and conversations with the members of her circle. As “Ice-Candy Man” and “Masseur,” Dil-Nawaz and Hassan, respectively, both of whom are Muslim, romantically pursue *Ayah*, for example, Lenny experiences their romantic and physical interactions due to her proximate presence, which affords her unusual access to these relationships and insights into the failure of state secularism.³

Similar to the process of feeling desire, the process of internalizing the pain of others' wounds gives rise to relations that Lenny develops to unknown others in her midst. In particular, her ability to experience others' pain in her own body suggests a mode of relationality wherein the film's thematic tropes of proximity and prosthesis model the possibilities for community that the state will ultimately fail to realize. Lenny's prosthetic reliance on *Ayah* opens the possibility for considering ways that the body is extended to represent the unfolding of a radical inter-subjectivity that destabilizes our understanding of the national body politic as given, organic, or “natural”—that is, self-contained. The scenes that stress Lenny's incorporation and embodiment of others' experiences of Partition, as well as of a prosthetically-lived experience of Shanta's everyday life, force us to reconfigure our understandings of the

³ In the film, Lenny refers to these characters at times as “Ice-Candy Man” and “Masseur,” but since the film is able to depict various points of view, characters in her midst refer to them by their proper names, Dil-Nawaz and Hassan, respectively.

body politic. Instead of forming a homogenous and unified entity of discrete individuals, overlapping relations seem to cohere along axes of relationality among a heterogeneous and disunified group to figure the body politic.

When the communal violence of Partition engulfs the city and spreads through the diverse community, Lenny watches in horror as differences in religion, gender, and class push former friends to redefine one other and themselves in stereotypical identitarian ways. Their differences divide and drive the group to its demise, leaving Lenny also to perceive herself along the lines of her differences—as a Parsee minority, as a disabled person with polio, and as a girl.⁴ Her awareness is complicated by the fact that the rational discourse of secularism and tolerance that she hears in the rhetoric of Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah seems incommensurate with the very irrational and sudden turn of events where friends turn into enemies overnight and entire localities are evacuated of neighbors only to be filled with unknown refugees and strangers within hours. Most disturbing are the discourse and images of violated, mutilated, and dying bodies that Lenny hears about on the radio or in the newspapers and then encounters in her daily errands and outings with *Ayah*. Confronted with the reports and scenes of the nation and population being torn apart and displaced, she quite literally internalizes pain, emotional volatility, and communal violence of the partition in her midst to make sense of it. The diminishing security, once maintained by secular relations, somatize into throbs and aches which jolt her awake from disturbing nightmares. Dreaming that she and other children are subject to the brutal quartering of bystanders witnessed in her daily walks, the pain associated with her polio

⁴ In the South Asian context, communal refers to the violence between religious communities or groups organized around the shared identification with a particular religion.

materializes the emotional, physical, and irrational responses to the Partition's violence.

As the narrative concludes, Lenny's loyalty and longing for *Ayah* remains intact based upon a relationality structured by proximity and prosthesis. She fails, however, to integrate it into her own social circle, resulting in unexpected betrayal and lifelong loss of *Ayah* as the violence of Partition fully erupts. Having decided to marry Hassan, who will convert to Hinduism, *Ayah* hides from an angry mob rallied by the love-spurned Dil-Nawaz in Lenny's home. Ultimately, Lenny discloses *Ayah's* whereabouts to the mob, who kidnap *Ayah*, thereby severing *Ayah* and Lenny's relationship, the memory of which haunts Lenny for the rest of her life. Claiming that she lost a part of herself when she lost *Ayah*, Lenny's description of her relation to *Ayah* as that of a limb of one body connected to another, offering the trope of a prosthesis as a model of relationality that defies the state's model of community predicated on ancestry and relations of blood to secure its national identity. Lenny aptly feels *Ayah's* absence as a phantom pain, the sort given rise to by a lost limb, but one that does not necessarily exist as such. Postcolonial policy predicted that the process of decolonization in India would transform this kinship of national belonging into alienation based on bloodshed, hardly a model that can be sustained. At the same time, Lenny's relation to *Ayah* offers an alternative nation of community predicated on haunting and affective affiliation.

“Failed realism”

Conventions used to mark cinematic time, such as stasis, coincidence and reversal, have generally implied a sense of incomplete modernity, or a failure to conceive of time as progressive, evident in Ray’s criticism of the failed realism of Hindi cinema.⁵ Whereas for Ray this failure to achieve a realist aesthetic was exemplified by lack of narrative progression and development, for Mehta the alleged lack of movement, realistic narrative structure, and self-reflexivity characteristic of Hindi popular film (i.e., elements of melodrama) offer the possibility of representing the necessary and constitutive role of affect in the production of subjectivity. They also offer the corollary suggestion of an alternative concept of time as that which is simultaneous and interruptive in its citation of the present and subjunctive. Mehta’s manipulations of melodramatic temporal conventions allow her to counter “realist” and progressively linear elite narratives of the history of partition and the origins of secularism.

Earth manipulates various conventions of melodrama in order to focus on the body and its affective expressions of secular understanding. In the process Mehta disturbs melodrama’s lowbrow and failed status and, somewhat surprisingly, exploits the main feature that makes for postcolonial melodrama’s so-called lowbrow status—the absence (or lack) of temporal unity. Against the linearity of realist time, melodrama as “failed” realism

⁵ Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1976): 19–24. Ray argues for the importance of defining realism as the privileged mode of narration to frame the emergence of the Indian nation state. Mehta self-consciously addresses and subverts Ray’s model in *Water* (2005), the third film of her *Elements* series. Citing Ray’s well-known film, *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Road*, 1955), she shifts the focus from the male protagonist, Apu, to his sister, Durga, by focusing in *Water* on Chuhiya, the female protagonist who plays a child widow relegated to an ashram in Varanasi. In a scene where Chuhiya brings an aged widow a forbidden sweet, Chuhiya impersonates Apu’s sister, Durga.

suggests alternative accounts of time by formally depicting temporality in the subjunctive mode, that is, in events to which individuals aspired, for which they wished or desired. Mehta is able to represent the time of the present, while simultaneously suggesting the other possibilities that might have been, thereby undermining the teleological authority asserted by state narratives, exemplified in the work of the Progressive Writers and in Ray's films.

Various aspects of melodrama can be said to characterize most of Mehta's films including *Fire* and *Water* which bracket *Earth* in the *Elements* trilogy. All three films feature popular Bollywood stars in "character" roles that are not dissimilar from those that define popular cinema. Including the *Elements* films, Mehta has made eight feature films to date. Her most recent, *Heaven On Earth* (2008), stars the Bollywood star Preity Zinta as Chand, a newlywed Indian woman whose arranged marriage brings her to an abusive relationship in Canada. Mehta is also in the process of filming one of her most ambitious projects, *Exclusion*, the story of 376 British Indian subjects' failed journey from Singapore to Canada aboard the Japanese ship Komagata Maru in 1914. The passengers were forced to return to India after being denied access into Canada under its exclusion laws.⁶ Her choice of subject and style, working within multiple genres—documentary, *masala*, romance, fiction, feature—follows the pattern of the *Elements* trilogy, which work simultaneously within these genres as well.⁷

⁶ The incident ignited much nationalist fervor with many of the passengers protesting the anti-immigration acts and the absence of colonial support upon their return to Calcutta. Twenty protestors died in police fire, and test legal cases challenging the decision of the Supreme Court that had denied them entry were initiated.

⁷ Very shortly after this writing, Mehta announced that she is in the process of writing a script based on *Midnight's Children* with the author himself.

The second in the *Elements* trilogy, *Earth*, received much praise from the state and critics alike.⁸ Although controversial in its choice of theme with its focus on highlighting the violence initiated by decolonization and Partition and the very questioning of the idea of the postcolonial state, Mehta seemed to offer a somewhat recognizable film from the perspective of both popular spectators, attracted to Bollywood, and mainstream critics, attracted to art cinema. The inclusion of Bollywood elements, songs and stars in particular, contributed to this reception, as did Mehta's particular adaptation of Sidhwa's novel, from which she departs significantly in the film's conclusion. The novel concludes with Dil-Nawaz, *Ayah's* erstwhile suitor, driven mad by unrequited love. He saves *Ayah* from a mob of neighborhood Muslims, only to coerce her into a marriage with him and a life of prostitution.

A faithful narrative adaptation of the novel's ending would potentially have incited movie audiences to much more violent and public protest than did the realistic representation of a same-sex relationship between two Hindu women in Mehta's previous film, *Fire*, which adapts a very famous and controversial short story, "Lihaf," by Progressive Writer, Ismat Chughtai.⁹ *Fire* was initially halted from being screened on account of the debate on the same-sex romance represented by the film.¹⁰ The state eventually supported the screening of *Fire* but not before having it re-examined by the Censor Board after Deepa Mehta appealed to the Supreme Court to allow it to be showed.

⁸ As mentioned earlier, it was India's nominee for Best Foreign Film for the 2000 Academy Awards; however, the Academy of Moving Picture Arts and Sciences did not select *Earth* among the five final nominees. The extreme shift in public and state response to Mehta's work can be attributed to the fact that *Earth* was a more acceptable product for Indian spectators. The narrative featured songs and Aamir Khan, one of the most famous and globally recognized stars of Bollywood.

⁹ Ismat Chughtai, *The Quilt & Other Stories*, trans. Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed (New Delhi: Kali for Women 1996): 7–19.

¹⁰ Ruth Vanita, *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

Particularly memorable during that period of controversy were the kinds of attacks made by Bal Thakeray, head of the Shiv Sena.¹¹ Arguing that Hindus could not be lesbians and that the story of two women in love was “un-Indian,” Thakeray rallied support against the film with the caution that the film would corrupt Hindu women. More acceptable, he alleged, would be the representation of these two characters as Muslim. After all, according to him, the actress Shabana Azmi was Muslim, and therefore the characters should have been named Muslim names like Saira, Najma, or Shabana. I would argue that in light of the protests against *Fire*, it would follow that Mehta’s desire to escape the Censor Board’s cuts, as well as the self-imposed industry silence on controversial topics such as sexuality and religious difference or communalism, might have pushed her to assert her critique in a different though equally trenchant way. It is perhaps for this reason that *Fire*’s more realist focus is replaced in *Earth* with a melodramatic one.

The melodramatic focus allows the film to foreground the failures of secularism to secure a space for consideration of difference. I focus on the formal “failures” of the film, i.e., the “failed” realism of Mehta’s particular mode of melodrama, in which neither the aesthetic mode of Bollywood *masala*, nor the aesthetic mode of Alternative Cinema, Parallel Cinema, or the New Wave dominate. I argue instead that a new mode emerges. Due to its global and transnational circulation and production, *Earth* acquires meaning in a way that differs from New Wave, that strand of Indian cinema which sought to distinguish itself from mainstream cinema and claimed instead to probe social problems in a realist register. If *masala* films were defined as a mixture of

¹¹ Bal Thakeray, the infamous leader and founder of the Shiv Sena (Army of Shiva), a Hindu nationalist group, forwarded the ideology of Hindutva or a Hindu-based Indian nation. Based in Maharashtra, Thakeray has been a vociferous critic of secularism and mobilized his followers around the nation in attacks of Muslims.

various overlapping genres, such as suspense, action, romance, social commentary, and humor, they were characterized as such in contrast to art cinema or parallel cinema. Indeed, the mutual interaction between these two types of film gave rise to Middle Cinema, which defined itself in opposition to *masala* film. While one could argue that much of Indian film even preceding the New Wave was transnational and had global appeal, the qualitative scale introduced by global reception necessarily produces new meanings thereby affording films like *Earth* much more circulation and attention than its predecessors.

Mehta's *Earth*, however, by virtue of its transnational production, distribution, and circulation does not fall neatly into any of these categories. It is perhaps better understood as a new kind of film made for consumption as public culture, one whose distribution and circulation produces a sense of the national at the nexus of the global and the local.¹² The mix of popular *masala* and art cinema aesthetics characterizes it as an even more hybrid form, difficult to classify and unusual in its appeal and ability to cross over audiences. Many of Mehta's films borrow melodramatic conventions from popular cinema while adapting them to increasingly realist narrative structures and more psychologically complex characters. At the same time, however, an emphasis on social issues shows the influences of New Wave's hallmark focus on matters of public concern but not entirely in realist terms. Although her films contain song-and-dance sequences, for example, they are

¹² One can certainly argue that films have always been products of international co-production, but the acceleration and intensity of the kinds of collaboration as well as the wide-spread and reception of films like Mehta's, which are productive of public culture, make for films which are qualitatively different than their predecessors even if they all may be characterized as international co-productions. Much of this tendency is precipitated by the neoliberal reforms of 2001, when India emerged from its former quasi-Socialist economic orientation and embraced free-market liberalization.

not entirely extra-diegetic as is characteristic of Bollywood films. Instead, they are used to forward the narrative while themes of Partition, change, and women's marginalization demonstrate an awareness of political realities and the subsequent need for social consciousness to initiate change.

Embodied "failure"

The movement between the popular and New Wave sensibilities is evident from the start of the film. *Earth* introduces its pre-occupation with the failures of political independence and secularism through a series of unexpected and abrupt reversals or unanticipated results in the first scene, where we encounter visual images of Lenny drawing a map of India with her adult voice recounting the events that were imminent in March of 1947. She recalls, "Along with the collapse of the British Empire and conclusion of colonial rule, came the division of the subcontinent into two independent nations—India and Pakistan. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, who had lived together for centuries were suddenly clamoring for pieces of India for themselves and the arbitrary lines the British would draw would scar the subcontinent forever." Fraught with anxiety and confusion over how this division would affect her ability to get to the park, the site of her daily excursions and visits with Shanta's friends, she adjusts her leg brace and walks into the dining room, where a table has been set for a dinner party.¹³

She purposely shatters one of her mother's precious plates to see what happens when it cracks, as she anticipates the subcontinent would also crack.

¹³ The film makes clear that in part because of her inability to venture out on her own or play with other children her age, Lenny's socialization occurs mostly with the group of adults who form Shanta's circle of friends.

At this point, many of the household servants run to the room to investigate the commotion and find Lenny's mother, not punishing her for breaking the plate but rewarding her for telling the truth about it. "Break a hundred plates," her mother says hugging her, "because you told the truth."¹⁴ The film establishes here a cluster of themes that it will revisit and which serve to structure the narrative. The mode of "failure" is exemplified in this scene through Lenny's performance of disobedience. She refuses to obey and submit to parental authority by acting out and refusing to identify along normalized gendered lines. The rewarding of Lenny's confession of her wayward behavior foregrounds "failure's" importance for the film.¹⁵

With this convention of a cracked plate concluding this scene, the film puts into motion a theme it will repeatedly revisit: "failure" contains its own redemptive reversal. If not simply to change the course of events unexpectedly, the "failure" of reason as a response turns to affect as a respite or interruption from the narrative at hand, thereby making a space for redefinition of terms, in this case, nation, community, and state. Against the expected celebratory news of impending Independence on the radio broadcasts, the somber droning music accompanying Lenny's action puts into crisis the false stability and assurance offered by the radio broadcasts and

¹⁴ Lenny's mother begins her sentence in English and ends in Gujarati, indicating the fluidity with which characters moved between languages in pre-Partition Lahore.

¹⁵ In this and other characterizations of Lenny, Mehta seems to be casting Lenny more in the manner of Lenny's brother, Adi, who, is a much more central character in the novel than her cousin, Adi, is in the film. In subverting the novel's narrative so that the filmic Lenny assumes more of the traits aligned with the boyhood masculinity of the novel's Adi, that is aggression, unruliness, boundless curiosity, and mischievousness, Mehta is able to show how this character fails to line up along normative and compulsory gender and sexual roles. It is this same curiosity that draws her to Shanta and allows her to relate to her along an axis of desire, rather than identification, as we will see in later in this chapter. I follow Halberstam here to consider ways that the intersection of queer theory and postcolonial theory, vis-à-vis ideas of "failure" in the form of improvisation, serve as critique concepts of actual failure. Judith Halberstam, "Notes on Failure," *Visual Studies*, University of California, Irvine (3 March 2006).

casts doubt on the idea of the nation to secure the ties of its imagined community. The impending failures of Independence, decolonization, and the establishment of nations are predicted in the analogy of the splintered communities, underscored by the objects highlighted in the *mise-en-scène*: the fragments of the cracked plate and the little body who hurled it in the hopes that *feeling* the cracking of India would allow her to make sense of the changes. As the film progresses, Lenny becomes attuned to violent events in Lahore that fissure the communities surrounding her. The violence introduces what feels like fractures on and in her body. By night, she recalls the carnage witnessed during the day through nightmares from which sharp leg pains jolt her awake. The result of having had polio, these pains permit her to relate to those who have suffered in the riots ravaging the city. Through experience of her disability, she incorporates the wounds of others.

The rational rhetoric of the state's secularism proves to be incommensurable with the irrational violence in the streets. The celebratory secular discourse of Nehru and Jinnah and Gandhi's appeals for unity, blaring from radios and plastered on newspapers, challenges her awareness in its failure to safeguard individuals. Not only are the solutions offered capable of providing reasonable models for cohabitation in the newly independent states, the rational rhetoric generates exactly the opposite of its stated intention. Lenny confronts scenes of bloodshed and violence with alarming frequency. These scenes resurface as somatic signs translated onto her own body. The daily sighting of mutilated neighbors and bloody quartered corpses materializes as aches in her limbs, leaving her longing for a former sense of wellbeing secured by community ties. Instead of tolerance based on understanding, the new secular attitudes induce irrational hatred and fear.

Her sense of the impending difficulty of dividing the country and the conflict that will ensue begins to translate into the manifest terms of her body. The rational terms of secularism become translated into affective acts of arson, demolition, and murder to which Lenny's body responds by producing somatic signs of pain and distress.

The incorporation of violence directed onto others through her own bodily and affective responses produces an inter-subjective version of relationality that challenges the ones prescribed by the emerging states of India and Pakistan. The explosive identitarian politics that erupt under the sign of secularism, however, impede the realization of a community based on Lenny's experience of relationality, which is premised on knowing oneself while simultaneously knowing the other. Based on a sense of teleological belonging, the rationale that the imagined community of the nation is configured around shares essence, which masks the affective ties that linked individuals before Independence. Although the relations between religious groups suggested by secular policy imply an equality between different groups, the distinction of community interests crystallizes formerly ambiguous features into elements such as ethnic, regional, and religious difference.

Multiple temporality and the time of haunting

If the episode examined in the previous section explained Lenny's experience of others' pain as her own, the scene discussed in this section picks up the implicit theme of simultaneity inherent to inter-subjectivity by examining ways that the film's aesthetic and formal strategies represent Lenny's process of understanding her relationships. Lenny joins *Ayah* and the group of her

friends assembled for their daily break in the park. She saunters away with Hassan, the masseuse, and encounters a man with a bioscope, selling views of a miniaturized world to children. Lenny peers into the darkness of a bioscope. With this shot, the film uses Lenny's gaze as the benchmark for visual organization. Her surroundings, i.e. the *mise-en-scène* cites various viewing practices and media—photographic, plastic, and musical—demonstrate diverse optical practices at work indexing multiple temporalities of consumption. Yet another visual and *aural* quote structures this scene. The scene begins with the music of the composer Naushad and Noorjehan singing, "*Jawan hai mohabbat*" ("love is young") in Mehboob Khan's 1947 hit film, *Anmol Ghadi* or *Precious Time*, whose plot is recalled by *Earth's* own through its focus on a love triangle that is also transformed and confounded by class differences. The reference is important in that the music accompanies the images Lenny sees as she peers into a bioscope lined with poster and postcard images of Gandhi and other nationalist figures.

Not only do those forms reference a past time when those media dominated aesthetic expression, they harken to previous methods of marking meaning and the sense of multiple temporality suggested by their various aesthetic frameworks. Even if this representation of hybrid and old and new viewing practices is a marker of modernity, nonetheless, the act of citation disrupts the expressed sense of linearity generally associated with the narrative film plots. The scene of disclosure that follows the breaking of the plate addresses the potential criticisms of the film as lacking in realism despite its attempt to offer a narrative of history. The entire film addresses the weight of the past and the important role attributed to temporality by narrating the story through flashback. Following a pattern of interrupting the progression

of linear time with mentions of memory or the past, this scene in particular marks the presence of the past in the present. Mehta employs music, a convention very much favored by Bollywood films but perceived as a failure of realism, to highlight the overlap and referencing of multiple aesthetic systems, discussed in the previous section.¹⁶

While the reference is brief, it nonetheless signals to the audience that the address of the film is structured through multiple visual practices informed by older technologies such as the bioscope and the phonograph atop it, nationalist postcards as ephemeral art objects that doubled as propaganda, portraiture, and sculpture. Lenny turns away from the bioscope and quickly shifts her glance to Hassan and the statue of Queen Victoria, whose presence in this and the final scene anchors the start of partition and memorializes its culmination. It is this sort of moment to which Thomas¹⁷ and Vasudevan refer when they argue that audiences make meaning in Hindi films through their experiences with inter-textuality; ways of seeing are organized by the temple, photo-deities, calendar art, popular prints, as well as movie posters. In this case, plastic art, such as that of sculpture, also figures as an element of visual and tactile organization.¹⁸ Lenny observes the statues under the unflinching gaze of Queen Victoria, while noting that she is being seen too.

In the first scene, the child Lenny aspires to an autonomous sense of subjectivity; her gaze organizes the composition of shots of socializing and visiting with friends in the park, marking a moment preceding the radical

¹⁶ Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York Routledge, 2004).

¹⁷ Rosie Thomas, "Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity," *Screen* 26.3–4 (May–August 1985): 116–131.

¹⁸ Ravi Vasudevan, "The Politics of Cultural Address in a "Transitional Cinema": A Case Study of Indian Popular Cinema," *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (Oxford and New York: Arnold, 2000): 130–164.

change precipitated by partition. Moving away from the bioscope to join the adults gathered on the lawn, Lenny turns her back on the projector and the scene cuts to a shot of her entering the park composed such that the bust of Queen Victoria, resolute and persistent, gazes seemingly upon her departing figure. Though the viewer registers that the imperial gaze supersedes Lenny's, Lenny herself remains unaware of her subjection to the visual regime of the Raj. In the film's final scene, which is set in the present, once again specters of the Raj haunt the park as the now headless statue of Victoria gazes upon Lenny's departing figure.

The film's conclusion revisits the space of the park, now transformed into a cemetery-like setting; a notable change of mise-en-scène marks the passage of fifty years. The formerly proud statue stands beheaded, haunting the post-partition ruins of the park. The adult Lenny recalls previous visits to the park and jokes shared with *Ayah* and the others. The multiplicity of time frames previously inhabited by the child Lenny, who peered into the bioscope previously, organized this moment. Now, a fixed long shot frames Lenny forlornly staring at the headless statues whose dismembered figures guard the ruins of the park. The dissolution of the British Empire diminishes their authority, so that their sovereignty lapses into absence, but, in its ghost-like presence, permeates Lenny's waking hours through memory and nightmarish loss. The absence of the statues' heads signifying the culmination of anti-colonial struggle and departure of the British results not, however, in emancipation, but rather the representation of the unceremonious decapitated figures shows a sense of ambivalence troped in Lenny's phantom pain of attenuated flesh in her impaired limb, a point the film stresses as Lenny's

adult figure, apparently autonomous and independent, unlike the rather spry child-Lenny, limps slowly across the film frame.

These two scenes are informed by visual practices that melodramatic Hindi films rely upon to stage and narrate stories. These shots share a similar composition: an iconic framing or organization of the image whereby stable meaning is achieved with the condensation of signification on a single subject, such as Lenny or the statue of Queen Victoria. Typically avoided in realist cinema, iconic framing and the tableau shots that they often emphasize have been described “as a moment caught between past and future, a pregnant moment.”¹⁹ At the same time, the static quality of the tableau shots are generally preceded and followed by movement-based shots, whose precedents lie in Hollywood cinema. These dynamic moments give the film a modern feel while moments of stasis wherein a sovereign subject assumes iconic authority offers an “archaic” feel. In freezing a shot through an iconic organization of the image, which suggests an organization that is archaic and mythical, from the past, and inserting it within movement shots, recognizable as modern or emerging from the present, the shot sequence produces a spectatorial experience of simultaneity and hybridity.²⁰

The final scene is powerful in its depiction of loss and longing, trademarks of melodramatic sentimentalism. In the scene featuring the child Lenny in the park, however, melodrama’s emphasis on temporality reveals that failed opportunity and loss notwithstanding; nonetheless, a sense of what might appear to be incomplete modernity can be transformed into a sense of

¹⁹ As quoted in Vasudevan, “Politics of Cultural Address “: 138

²⁰ Unlike Ray who seemed to argue for these moments as lapses in filmmaking, Vasudevan argues that in fact these intentional choices represent the medium’s possibilities for negotiating contradictions of postcolonial modernity. Vasudevan, “Politics of Cultural Address “: 134.

alternative modernity by trying to hold those senses of temporality together in the same space.²¹ The deployment of pre-modern aesthetic systems in modern texts, as well as the multiple temporalities inhabited by the spectator in making meaning of these various visual and performative systems, destabilizes our sense of temporal linearity, a necessary feature undergirding accounts of universal modernity. Predicated on characterizations of time as linear and progressive, these explanations associate movement with progression, and associate progression with development, psychological, moral, and civilizational. Finally, development of a realist sensibility implies the capacity for documenting reality. These logics and associations are necessary for the universal applicability of realist accounts premised as they are on the concept of homogenous time required for imagining the nation. It is precisely this universality that postcolonial melodrama critiques in the uneven experience of temporality as interruptive and simultaneous.

Reversal of relationality

Indeed the opening scene's depiction of the loud cracking plate interrupted the linear and progressive sense of colonial rule and heralded the arrival of postcolonial independence as necessarily interrupted by the violence of partition. If the first scene depicted Lenny drawing and then dropping the plate as a metaphor for the cracking of British India, thereby stressing the undoing of centuries long modes of tolerance between Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and other minority religious communities, the scene that follows shortly thereafter depicts a representation of such accord and its abrupt

²¹ This is a point to which Thomas and Vasudevan allude by stressing the role of inter-textuality in making of meaning in Hindi film.

reversal. Three things are of importance here for depicting the failure of relations across racial difference: the movement of the camera, its framing of individual characters, and Mehta's subversion of typical melodramatic conventions. One's first impression might be that the plot's unexpected and sudden shifts merely follow the conventions of the kinds of multi-genre formulaic *masala* films that Ray derides. Such a reading, however, precludes the inter-textual references and self-consciousness that characterize *Earth* and thwarts a full understanding of the narrative.

In the scene, Lenny's parents, Rustom and Bunt Sethna, host a dinner party. Parsee, Sikh, and British characters sit around a table under which the children Lenny and Adi hide in order to eavesdrop on the adult conversation, while Hindu and Muslim servants prepare and serve the meal. This particular scene is a visual quote of one of the first scenes of Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (1937), a celebrated French anti-war film. Set during World War I, it is the story of a group of French prisoners-of-war whose relationships with each other and a German general demonstrate national, religious, linguistic, and class differences can potentially divide and unite people in a variety of ways. At the same time, the film shows how these differences are at times overcome. *Grand Illusion* can be characterized as a work of Poetic Realism. Though not a movement like the French New Wave, which followed, Poetic Realism did characterize the mid-1930s work of directors such as Marcel Carné, Pierre Chenal, Julien Duvivier, and, of course, Renoir.²² Poetic Realism draws upon the aesthetics of 19th-century melodrama and Romantic poetry, and may be characterized as representing "the lost, and/or unattainable; fatalism;

²² Poetic Realism draws on the qualified optimism of the Popular Front's temporary alliance between the Communist and Socialist parties against the advent of right-wing chauvinisms.

nostalgia producing torpor and despair; geographic marginality of locale and social marginality of characters; and above all, pessimism.”²³ These films of the 1930s and 1940s featured marginalized characters whose last chance at love is thwarted much like those of Shanta, Hassan, and, indeed, Lenny.

Caught by German enemy soldiers, a group of French officers and soldiers plan an escape that forces collaboration across class, religious, and cultural lines. The scene from Renoir’s film occurs after a scene in a German camp after two of the film’s protagonists, Captain de Bouldieu and Lieutenant Maréchal, are shot down in enemy air space. Lieutenant Maréchal is wounded and has his arm in a bandage, a condition that necessitates the hospitality of a German officer seated behind. The officer happens to speak French and helps him cut his meat, an act of prosthetic reliance.

As both are officers, the German Captain von Rauffenstein, whom we later learn will become disabled as a result of war wounds, has invited them for lunch with his men. As captive prisoners of war, the hospitality and camaraderie extended to them by the German officers is initially surprising. Captains von Rauffenstein and de Bouldieu appear to be united by class. Over time, however, the revelation that the Germans and French share memories of places and people eases the various factions into a sense of community until the convivial bunch is interrupted by news of a German attack of a French soldier. A German soldier brings in the wreath and its presentation and the announcement of the French soldier’s death reduce the room to silence. An order declaring that Captain de Bouldieu and Lieutenant Maréchal be transferred to a prison camp intensifies the somber mood of the

²³ Andrew Dudley, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

previously merry diners—German and French alike. The scene following this one shifts dramatically to the setting of the prison camps.

At first it would seem that to draw on the aesthetics of Poetic Realism would leave little room to consider how such a pessimistic outlook might be mobilized or redeemed; however, whereas the pessimism of Poetic Realism focuses on the unfolding of a projected failed future, Mehta highlights the intensity and possibility of reversals and their inherent potentials surprisingly implicit even in failure as the following reading suggests. Initially, Mehta focuses on the similarities of Renoir's film to hers—its themes of division, violence, betrayal, lost love, and the negotiation of difference. In doing so, Mehta implicitly initiates a comparison of the events of decolonization in India in 1947 to the events of World War II in which 2.5 million Indian soldiers fought in the colonial army, a factor which goes unnoticed in the paradoxical colonial assessment of Indians as fit to fight for European freedoms but not free and "unfit to rule their own country," as the Sethnas' dinner guest, Colonel Rodgers, charges.

Finally, Mehta's citation also transforms the conventions of Poetic Realism through her particular subversion into postcolonial melodrama. We see first the servants in the kitchen, preparing dinner, and then the guests in the dining room. In that scene, the dialogue slips between Hindi and Punjabi, as with the previous scene between Lenny and her mother, slipping between English and Gujarati, showing the characters effortlessly translating and communicating with each other across various languages. As the cook, Imam Din, prepares the meal for the dinner party as well as the servants, he coaxes *Ayah* in Punjabi to eat more, so that she can take care of her mischievous wards. She graciously responds in Hindi with a light-hearted defense of the

children, asserting that by now they are probably asleep and not likely to bother anyone, thereby renewing her ties to Lenny, and by extension Lenny's cousin, Adi. This sort of sustained communication across languages puts into question our understanding of the need and even efficacy of "rough translation," as Chakrabarty has described.²⁴ The code switching suggests an alternative model whereby the transmission of affect materialized in affection for the children and food for *Ayah* allow the characters to speak to each other in multiple mother tongues at the same time. Not only do the two languages maintain their own terms, they efface the need for translation at all.²⁵

The camera relays the agreeable dynamic set up in the kitchen to a similar jovial interaction enjoyed by the Sethnas' and their distinguished friends in the dining room. A singular long uninterrupted take relates the representation of ethical accord characterizing the two scenes by moving from the kitchen into the site of the dining room, where the Sethnas' guests chatter in English as the children, Lenny and her cousin, Adi, eavesdrop under the table. Hiding underneath the dining table with her cousin, Lenny whispers the guests' names to him. The spectator is introduced to the Sethnas and their guests, Mr. and Mrs. Singh and Mr. and Mrs. Rogers, a colonial officer and his wife, who are also seated around a dining table in much the fashion that soldiers and generals are in *Grand Illusion*. Though bound by the shared

²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁵ This is precisely the mode of relating that secular policy will paradoxically undo after independence. Not only do religious and communal differences remain reified, state and language policy subsequently Sankritize the sort of Hindi that would currently be recognized as Hindustani, a language that draws on its multiple origins: Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian, among other languages. The state's language policy results in the understanding of Hindi as a "Hindu" language. Meanwhile Urdu becomes understood as Persianate or Mughal and Punjabi is reduced to a regional language. The Hindi cinema is one of the few sites where Hindustani as a spoken language maintains a presence while the nationalized Hindi is heard on national television and radio.

experience of war and familiarity with their parallel but oppositional roles of this conflict, the French and German soldiers' national allegiances necessarily separate them, a point which is made in the film when the meal is interrupted by the arrival of a wreath for French soldiers shot during a German offensive.

Similarly, in the time that immediately preceded partition, though elite groups shared common interests, nonetheless colonial rule along with racial and religious differences still divided the colonizers from the colonized. The composition of the first shots of this scene, however, and continuous movement of the camera circling around the characters, establishes their physical relation to each other, rather than bring attention to these differences. The uninterrupted long take of the shot also adds to the effect of representing the intimacy shared by the characters, evident in the shared pleasure in humor:

- Mr. Sethna: Oh, you must listen to this one, Mr. Rogers. A Tommie and an Indian find themselves sharing a railway compartment.
- Mrs. Sethna: This is Lenny's favorite joke, my daughter.
- Mr. Sethna: The Indian lifts a bottle of Scotch to his mouth again and again. He does not offer any to the soldier. When the Indian leaves the compartment for a moment, the soldier quickly takes a sip or two from the bottle. Again, the Indian leaves the compartment, the Tommie sneaks a swig. Finally they get to talking. Now the soldier confides he took a drop or two from the bottle of scotch. "Since you didn't offer it to me, old chap, I helped myself," he exclaims. The native is shocked. "But that is my *pesab!* Urine in the bottle," he exclaims. "My *ayurved* prescribed it as a cure for syphilis."

So far, at least formally and thematically, the scene recalls the parallel scene in *Grand Illusion*. The first striking similarity lies in formal organization: characters from different nations share a meal around a dining table. A mobile camera provides an establishing shot relating the unlikely grouping of

adversaries as comrades in *Grand Illusion* and friends in *Earth*. Mehta's scene, however, departs from the omniscient point of view, i.e., a unified historical narrative that characterizes the scene from *Grand Illusion*.

In *Earth*, rather, we see the narrative split by Lenny's point of view from under the table, a perspective that supplements that of the members of the dinner party. On the one hand, the camera's framing of this party suggests how the scene appears to those characters seated around the table. On the other hand, the point of view replicates Lenny's through the snatches of the adults' dialogue.

Lenny is not only established as a central figure in the film, but also presented as a parallel figure to *Ayah*. Using Lenny as a prosthesis who in this instance stands in for *Ayah*, the film introduces the themes of the unrepresentable and marginalized but necessary subaltern figure through the use of melodramatic simultaneity and temporal doubling, thereby allowing Mehta to parallel subaltern history to elite history. Lenny's understanding of the events depicted in the scene reveal her as a stand-in for all those such as *Ayah*, who will succumb to the events these officers and community leaders initiate even in the face of subaltern resistance and refusal to choose nationalities corresponding to Hindu or Muslim affiliations. Lenny witnesses the production of official history by the adults at the table, but also a history from below, that of the subaltern groups who are invisible and therefore rendered spectral in elite representations of these events. This claim does not render or suggest that Lenny is a subaltern figure, but it does suggest that her invisibility in presence recalls *Ayah's* marginalization and spectrality. This depiction of Lenny absent while she is in attendance at the party from under

the table extends her role as a prosthetic subject who initiates a double signification.

Mehta extends the theme of relationality based on shared experience, albeit from different perspectives, through the camera's refusal to establish a central point of view, a decision that consequently denies identification with any particular character. Contra conventions of Hollywood continuity editing, wherein a relationship progressing between characters through dialogue and spectatorial identification with the speaker is typically established through patterns of shot/reverse-shot editing, this scene melds these subject positions, so that identification does not remain distinct but blends into a collective spectatorial position. Indeed, the voice-off of any given character usually does not correspond to the character in the frame. The discussion of colonial rule, independence, and partition, however, quickly overturns the circuit of relationality that was based on the experience of shared pleasure in humor, when Mr. Sethna the joke by saying, "You know, I learned something the other day, Mr. Rogers, *ke*, there was no syphilis in India until the British came."²⁶

Talk of the British departure imminent partition throws the scene into a radically different editing pattern. The wandering camera settles on individual characters but only momentarily before it switches to the point of view of another character. The unsettling and rapid cuts immediately increases the tension of the spectator as characters raise their voices and quick, reaction shots very specifically identify the speaker and the respondent so that his or her difference now constitutes the scene that quickly becomes violent:

²⁶ The insertion of the Hindi or Urdu article *ke* or "that" as a part of the assertion in English demonstrates the code switching and mutual translation that is ubiquitous in this historical period.

Mr. Rogers: Well you won't be able to blame everything on us for long old chap.

Mr. Singh: Finally, we will have self-rule.

Mr. Rogers: You think you will be up to it old boy?

Mr. Singh: Why not? I'm up to ruling you and your empire. Why do you think we cannot have self-rule?

Mrs. Singh: *Maykya*, please don't shout.

Mr. Singh: I'm not shouting. I'm telling this man to quit India.

Mrs. Sethna: *Janoo*, tell everyone about the Sikhs near the socks.

Mr. Sethna: You know, Mr. Rogers...

Mr. Rogers: If we quit India today, you'll bloody well fall on each other's throats. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs will jockey for power. Wait and see. What about you Parsees? If you jump into the middle of this bloody mess you'll be mangled into chutney.

Mr. Sethna: Actually, after the British leave, let whoever wishes rule, *hah*, Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh. We Parsees are too few in Lahore to take sides, you know. We shall cast our lot with whoever governs Lahore.

Mr. Rogers: Sensible chaps. As for you dear man, you had better wisen up. The division of India is imminent. The Muslims want their own country. They want a Pakistan.

Mr. Singh: Shut up, you white man. We will settle our differences ourselves.²⁷

Mr. Sethna: Another drop of wine, old chap?

Mr. Rogers: Who will settle your differences? You Sikhs, with your Master Tara Singh?

Mr. Singh: Yes, he is my leader. I will obey him.

Mr. Rogers: Tara Singh with his Sikhs are a bloody bunch of murdering fanatics.

Mr. Singh gets up to strangle Mr. Rogers.

Mrs. Singh: He didn't mean to insult you.

Mr. Singh: He very well did mean to insult me. *Is gore ko sab pata hai!*²⁸ Apologize!

Mr. Rogers: Go to hell you, you son of a fool.

Mr. Singh: You white monkey.

Mr. Rogers: Jaswant, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. This bloody country. This is the only home I've ever known.

²⁷ These are transcriptions of the subtitles. Mr. Singh begins his response in Punjabi and ends in English.

²⁸ "This white man knows everything," Mr. Singh interjects in Punjabi, switching into English.

The identification of characters along religious and racial lines dramatically unravels the civil mode of relating established earlier. While this scene rightly champions Mr. Singh's colonial resistance, and the new postcolonial subjectivity constituted through that resistance, Mehta seems to caution the audience that such a process can simultaneously efface modes of relation that generate accord. After all, Lenny's father offers his joke in a spirit of resistance as well.

In both cases, however, the stakes are the same in that the two examples demonstrate how affect is mobilized even if in the two examples, it is variously disposed. The scene concludes with another series of reversals—the anger of the colonial officer quickly turns to nostalgia: “This is the only home I’ve ever known,” Mr. Rogers laments:

Mr. Sethna: Of course, of course, Mr. Rogers. You British have done a lot for us, *na janoo*?²⁹ You’ve built us roads, given us your exemplary postal system. And uh, then...

Mrs. Sethna: Language! Don’t forget English language, beautiful language!

Mr. Singh: Let’s not forget the syphilis.

The dialogue segues into a narrative of colonial progress and the establishing of markers of the modern condition—transportation systems and a cosmopolitanism established by the use of the English language which are then immediately undermined by the mention of another marker of the modern—disease and contagion.³⁰ The potentially violent dinner conversation is quickly made intimate once more through the children’s antics. They pinch

²⁹ *Janoo* is the diminutive form of *jaan*, which translates to “my life” or “my heart.”

³⁰ For a discussion of ways that disease, colonial public-health practices, and Western medicine played a role in the governance of colonial bodies and territories, see David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993).

Mrs. Rogers from beneath the table and interrupt the intense discussion with a few moments of levity.

Mehta's manipulation of time through a jarring juxtaposition of a single continuous shot that contrasts with the quick succession of short ones, the speed with which all of the political conditions of the time are established along with the relentless seriality of reversals, seems to indicate an altogether different sense of postcolonial melodramatic temporality than Poetic Realism in *Grand Illusion*, which perhaps stresses the sense of gravity and hopelessness for which melodrama is known. While the melodrama of Poetic Realism in *Grand Illusion* confronted the spectator with the inevitable progression of time and its attendant losses and failures, in *Earth*, the focus on loss and failure, that is loss of modes of relationality and the failure of progress to safeguard those modes, seems at least representative of accord that existed once, a potential for redemption through avowing the very failures which mark its absence.

Screening serial subjectivity

In addition to its focus on "failure's" figuration of temporality, the film focuses on three expressions of "failure" with regard to characterization and simultaneity. These characterizations are the figuring of Lenny refracted through *Ayah*, and, to a lesser degree, the child servant, Papoo, as figures of projected failure, or figures for whom the future seems to promise little. Papoo, the daughter of one of the low-caste servants, like many Hindus, feels threatened as partition looms and the Hindus of Lahore flee for parts of the postcolony which will become India. In order to stave off anticipated attacks on the young girl, her poor family arranges for her to convert to Christianity

upon marrying an elderly man with the added hopes that he might provide for her.³¹ At the festive marriage ceremony, Lenny abruptly and ungraciously comments upon his wizened appearance, provoking the drugged and drowsy Papoo to retort jokingly that Lenny will never marry because of her limp: Lenny is likely doomed to a loveless future.

On the one hand, the scene depicts the relative difference of their projected failures. Clearly the economic and social destabilization of the partition induces Papoo's family to take desperate measures: they betroth their young daughter to a wizened old man, six or seven times her age, in the hopes of providing her with future economic security. Lenny's elite position promises a future free of economic hardship. On the other hand, Papoo casts Lenny into her own position, albeit negatively, by suggesting that she could very well be in her place but for her disability and her class position. Papoo implies that though she may be poor, she is not disfigured like Lenny, whose class position *may* but will not necessarily guarantee her a marriage proposal, even if it secures her material comfort.

The comparison of their bodies and social positions, and the suggestion that their futures could be switched, rests upon the logic of the subjunctive melodramatic mode and coincidence that will be evinced in *Midnight's Children* when the character, Mary Pereira, Saleem's *ayah*, switches the bodies of Saleem and Shiva, two babies born at the moment of independence. In the process of transforming one to a subaltern and the other to an elite, she converts each baby's religion from Hindu to Muslim and vice versa. Here, Papoo's suggestion has a similar effect of introducing the concept of

³¹ These conversions occurred under conditions of abduction but also agency as attested to in accounts collected by Menon and Bhasin. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

substitutability and seriality, as Lenny and Papoo are momentarily imagined to be inter-changeable, thereby equivalent or equal subjects. Indeed, this equality is also the premise of citizenship, a promise that goes unfulfilled by the failure of the Indian secular state. Like the case of the switched identities of Saleem and Shiva in *Midnight's Children*, however, the exchange results in the over-valuation of the elite and the subordination of the subaltern despite Lenny's affection for Papoo.³² No action Lenny might take would help Papoo from following the course set by her family.

Ayah's reality resembles Papoo's but for her age, and thus radically differs from Lenny's, again because of their class backgrounds. Nonetheless, their projected futures seem similarly restricted—in *Ayah's* case, through her lack of material resources, in Lenny's, through her disability.³³ While Lenny is clearly the protagonist of the film, it is difficult to follow her story without considering its imbrication in *Ayah's* story. In fact, except for the opening and closing scenes, there are no other significant scenes in which Lenny is shown on her own, a feature which substantiates the previously mentioned comparison between the two and underscores the fact that her sense of self is contingent on her relations to others. The repetition of seemingly serialized bodies suggests a mode of relationality wherein proximity and prosthesis model the basis for community.

³² Similarly, in *Midnight's Children*, even if Saleem's prosthetic reliance on Shiva is established, for as long as Shiva is kept from social access he remains a subaltern figure.

³³ Of course, I do not mean to suggest here that marriage is the only indicator of a future for this character, but Lenny's disability is depicted as limiting her education as well. In the novel, she is home-schooled and in the film, the spectator observes that limited mobility decreases the contact she has with other children. I am also aware of the potential problems of casting disability as failure. I seek to complicate the debates around this point by considering the potentials of failure and cast disability as failure in as much as it is *perceived* as failure rather than actual failure.

It is precisely the *breakdown* of relations organized around models of proximity and prosthesis, however, which are heralded by the progression of partition. In the consequent collapse of community, Lenny finds the meaning of inter-subjective relationality that counters the state's imposed citizen subject position only to lose her physical tie and shared life with *Ayah*. As the date of partition looms, the remaining friends—Hassan, Dil-Nawaz, Hari, Tota Ramji, and Lenny gather in the evening around the light of a dim oil lamp in the courtyard facing *Ayah*'s room to compare notes. The consequences of communal strife are laid bare as Dil-Nawaz defends his role in exploding grenades in the homes of Hindu neighbors whom he has known his entire life. Arguing that his actions serve as retaliation for events in a previous scene—a grenade for each breast lopped off his sisters' bodies on the train of corpses that arrived from Amritsar—Dil-Nawaz's confessions silence his friends into a state of shock. The conversation then turns from ill-fated arrivals to sudden departures. Tota Ramji informs the group that with friends like Dil-Nawaz intent on massacring members of minority groups, he and other Hindus like him have little choice other than to leave India when it becomes independent. Hari surprises the group with the news that he will renounce his Hindu identity and become Muslim in order to stay in Lahore. The spate of sudden and unsettling conversions and changes destabilizes the group, leaving *Ayah*, Hassan, and Lenny alone to consider the future.

The heated discussion and threat of partition forces *Ayah* to consider leaving Lahore, which the Sethnas have argued is no longer safe for her as a Hindu. While the circuit of friendly repartee had formerly sustained her, it is clearly reversed now as Dil-Nawaz's account of violence he perpetrated against Hindus fills her with fear. She considers the Sethnas' offer to send her

to Amritsar, which will become part of the Indian state. As *Ayah* confides her mounting worries to Hassan, she loses her composure, and races into her room to sob in private. Hassan instructs Lenny to leave and follows *Ayah* to comfort her. Having won her interest over Dil-Nawaz's vain efforts, Hassan now takes *Ayah* in his arms and they consummate their relationship.

The unfolding of this powerful scene proceeds surprisingly swiftly in light of the slow and heavy accompanying music. On the eve of independence for India and Pakistan, the colors of both flags—green and white of Pakistan, and then of the Indian saffron—constitute the palette of Mehta's mise-en-scène and are the focus of the camera which lingers on the moving bodies bathed in these shades. In the dim candlelight of *Ayah*'s room, Hassan unfurls *Ayah*'s sari. The soft and shadowy lighting attempts to undercut what is actually a striking and remarkable scene: the union of a Muslim man and Hindu woman, a rarely touched upon and controversial topic in Indian films even today. Again, much like the dining scene, the pace of the film hastens uncomfortably as the assumed omniscient point of view is jolted from a seemingly objective perspective and shocked into identification with Lenny's point of view and then just as suddenly with Dil-Nawaz's. The two of them voyeurishly peer into the bedroom from small windows, unbeknownst to *Ayah* or Hassan. Just as the spectator identifies with Dil-Nawaz's perspective, he turns and the camera shifts to an omniscient point of view again. Though the camera captures a reaction shot of Lenny peering at Dil-Nawaz, again recalling the pace of the dinner scene, the film does not permit the shock of this surprising representation to sink in as the focus moves to *Ayah* and Hassan's perspective.

The scene of perceived betrayal and transformation undergone by Lenny and Dil-Nawaz shifts immediately to one where relationality is renewed. Just as Mehta uses the excess of Poetic Realism to represent “failure” as potential inherent as reversal in the dinner scene, this scene of voyeurism signifies the feeling of losing a mother figure to desiring *Ayah*. Of crucial importance for the development of Lenny’s subjectivity is the logic of seriality and doubling through which the two characters, Hassan and *Ayah*, define themselves on the eve of partition, the witnessing of which interrupts Lenny’s internalization of state ideology. As *Ayah* dresses, Hassan offers to marry her implying that she could convert to Islam. Upon seeing her hesitation, he suggests instead that he become a Hindu. It is precisely that this model of relationality cannot be contained in the identitarian politics and violence which have constituted state secularism in South Asia. The focus on proximity and corporeality as generative of affective circuits and inter-subjective relations counters the concept of separate, prior and autonomous individuals, the premise of the state’s ideal citizen subject reiterated on radio broadcasts and newspapers documenting news of independence featured in the previous scene.

If the dinner scene demonstrated how Lenny’s exposure to a circuit of relationality based on affective ties, the realization of whose potential ceases when independence forces characters to identify along the lines of race and religion, this scene demonstrates for Lenny the redemptive reversal for renewal available in “failure.” If Hassan and *Ayah*’s religious identities make their pairing incommensurable or untenable, the process of refusing to adhere to the coordinates configured for them by the state, the two redefine this secular policy so that the ethical component of secular reasoning sustains their

citizenship irrespective of national belonging. Moreover Lenny's observation of the potential of desire to initiate affective relations for *Ayah* and Hassan activates her affiliations for her as well.³⁴ That is, Lenny's subjectivity is produced in this voyeuristic act through her desire for *Ayah*.

Here, the film also exploits a figuration of failure in the form of Lenny's failing body to consider its hidden potential as "failure" with resources for renewal. Indeed, it is her own marginalization and subsequent mobilization of experience with disability that heightens her sense of her own embodiment, pain, and sexuality. Though her disability limits her activities in many undesirable ways, her affective response to it sharpens her sense of the complicated unfolding of historical events through relations with difference. If, for example, the terms of colonial discourse posited that resistant potential in mimicry was the simultaneous occupation by the colonized of the position of original and copy, for Mehta "failed" realism's resistant potential is the subversion of progressive, linear time, as definitive of subjectivity and history by the postcolonial subject's simultaneous occupation of multiple sites or points of view, i.e., Lenny sees from her own perspective, Dil-Nawaz's, and in identifying with *Ayah*, perhaps through hers as well.³⁵

While the scene seems to function within the linear and sequential temporality of realism, the shifting and displaced points of view imply a sort of simultaneous viewing or inter-subjectivity that seem to characterize postcolonial optics.³⁶ Through her use of "failed" realism as subversion of

³⁴ This is a moment where the film subverts the novel, in that this scene extends a passage in which Lenny's desire for Shanta is figured but no part of this scene is written about explicitly in the film.

³⁵ I draw here on Bhabha's seminal work on mimicry. Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

³⁶ I understand this term to mean optics that belies alternative engagements with the technologies and aesthetics of the modern medium of film.

conventional melodrama, Mehta defies realist modes of filmmaking through her framing of this shot and camera work. The logic of the camera eye challenges the spectator's. The absence of an establishing shot to identify a central point of view and the eye-line match of Lenny's perspective to Dil-Nawaz's suggests that they share *Ayah* as the object of their desire. The astonishing and abrupt reversal again of spectatorial expectations in terms of point of view and camera angle, among other aesthetic choices, underscores Lenny's desire for *Ayah* through the act of recognition of multiple frames of temporality in the same space, a key reading strategy that stresses the importance of inter-textuality for making meaning in Hindi film.³⁷ The assumption that this scene was simply capitalizing on Bollywood conventions of gratuitous heterosexual coupling is reversed in this scene of triangulated desire for *Ayah*, producing a new subject position for Lenny counter to and redemptive of the one forced upon her as marginalized, disabled, and asexual child. I argue that her response here is not one of naïve or child-like shock or confusion, rather it is one of longing and disappointment, and not simply over *Ayah*'s imminent departure. I would argue that it is in this scene that she confronts the severing of her prosthetic tie with *Ayah* as her affective reliance upon *Ayah* becomes one of desire rather than dependence. Lenny's response is a mixture of possessive panic and separation anxiety, which emerge in the penultimate scene of her unwitting betrayal. In a desperate attempt to hold on to *Ayah* in Lahore, she discloses her hiding place to a manipulative Dil-Nawaz who unleashes the furies of an angry mob and traps *Ayah* into a subsequent life of prostitution and danger.

³⁷ Rosie Thomas, "Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality," *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995): 157–182.

To further support this reading of voyeurism as suggestive of sexual desire, I consider this scene as one that adapts and resonates with a similar scene in *Fire*, which serves perhaps as another inter-text or as a prequel, which was banned and censored amidst much public discussion in the popular press due to its depiction of a lesbian couple, Radha and Sita. I argue that the contextualization of *Earth* is an adaptation not only of Sidhwa's novel but also an adaptation of the theme of sexuality, which appears in all three of the films of Mehta's *Elements* trilogy. Lenny's desire for *Ayah*, played by Nandita Das, recalls the same-sex relationship set forth in *Fire*, in which Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, wherein two sisters-in-law fall in love in the stifling environment of an extended family in late 1980s Delhi. This intertextual reading emerges through a comparison of the framing of the two acts of voyeurism. In *Fire*, the patriarch of the family walks in on his wife, Radha, with Das's character Sita in bed together. In *Earth*, the characters of Lenny and Dil-Nawaz, *Ayah*'s initial suitor, watch Das's character, *Ayah*, with Hassan, the masseur played by Rahul Khanna.

While it certainly is not the case that every character played by an actor recalls every other character, the practice of adaptation exploits the idea of actor as text, or, in this case, inter-text. The filmic representation of a character from a novel has the advantage of being embodied in an actor or star, according to Robert Stam. This representation, mediated as it were by the cinematic medium, however, refers to the image's absence in presence. Though present during the film's production, the actor is absent at the time of spectatorial reception resulting in what Metz described as a "rendezvous manqué." This missed meeting initiates a process of spectatorial projection of the star.

Although the filmic performer has a signal advantage denied the novelistic character—to wit, his bodily existence—that existence is mediated by film’s imaginary signifier; it is turned into absence, and thus made even more “available” for our projections. Our projections spread themselves as it were, not over the virtualities of the verbal text but rather “over” the actually existing body and performance of the actor, which cues and receives and resists our projections. Adaptations of novels thus provoke a tension between the characters as constructed and projected during our reading, and embodied actors/characters witnessed on screen. Our spectatorial impressions are further shaped by what we already know about the actors, performances, and even in the case of stars, of what we know about their three-dimensional lives, their sexual relationships, and their opinions and feelings as channeled by the mass media, all of which feed into the reception of the performance.³⁸

In as much as Mehta planned the trilogy with the same ensemble of actors, the similarity of plot occurrences in two different narratives forces a comparison that initiates a reading of Lenny and Dil-Nawaz’s desire for *Ayah* as one that is commensurate with the patriarch of *Fire*, who precipitates the lovers’ expulsion. In the end, Dil-Nawaz is responsible for Masseur’s murder and complicit with Lenny in *Ayah*’s abduction.

Mehta bypasses the possibility of state censorship by embedding her critique in a scene that uses simultaneity to suggest models of secular inter-subjectivity across film texts, characters, and actors. Through this understanding of scenes as non-unitary, (i.e., not one that is unitary and theorization of adaptation that is sensitive to the cultural underpinnings of the

³⁸ Robert Stam and Alexandra Raengo, *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005): 23.

text's circulation in the public media) we are offered a model of inter-subjectivity and relationality ordered around the idea of a libidinal circuit organizing formal representation, cinematic practice and spectatorial understanding. This model challenges the state's imposition of a static subject position for representations of Hindu and Indian identity articulated in the ban on the film after *Fire* opened.³⁹ The potentials for censorship of *Fire* seem to be merely suspended as these then have consequences of possible censorship of *Earth* as well. The last of the trilogy, *Water*, faced state opposition and Mehta contended with outright death threats from Hindu nationalist groups that impeded Mehta from making the film in India where shooting had already commenced.

Conclusion: "A matter of time"

In conclusion, melodrama is an aesthetics of "failure" or "failed" realism, because of its capacity for foregrounding the importance of temporality as it is articulated in the mode's repeated thematization of time in its emphasis on coincidence, fate, missed opportunities, suspense, delays, and flashbacks. This thematization has the effect of reversing the sense of incomplete modernity or failure demonstrated by the betrayal of Enlightenment reason for securing democracy for states produced under the shadow of European colonial expansion, as well as for the failed postcolonial state. On the other hand, melodrama's emphasis on temporality reveals that, nonetheless, a sense of incomplete modernity can be recast as an alternative or hybrid modernity. The attempt to hold those senses of temporality together in the same space, a

³⁹ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005). Gopinath addresses the politics of naming this a lesbian relationship and its complicated history in South Asian queer studies.

point articulated by Thomas's and Vasudevan's argument by stressing the role of inter-textuality in making meaning in Hindi film. The deployment of pre-modern aesthetic systems in modern texts, as well as the multiple temporalities inhabited by the spectator in making meaning of these multiple systems represented in the film then destabilize our sense of linear time, which is the time of realism, and universal modernity.

Thus, melodrama, which Ray, Sarkar, and others characterize as a failed aesthetics of realism, offers up a productive critique of the project of European modernity and its universalizing tendencies. Moreover, in promoting a realist aesthetics that privileges the deployment of reason in representing psychological complexity and restraint, Ray leaves little room to consider the dangers of faith in blindly instrumentalized reason in the state's use of the term secular in situating its claim as a democracy and also initiating a pogrom against its Muslim citizens. It also forecloses the potentials of the unreasonable modeled by Lenny's ability to relate affectively across religious difference and produce a more ethical sense of the secular, which is also the purview of melodrama.

Secondly, melodrama's emphasis—indeed, reliance—upon affect demonstrates the textual production of subjectivities that counter the ones offered by the state. Although Hindi film melodrama is characterized as lacking depth, unable to portray psychological realism, and deviating from rational understandings of reality, I argue that it is precisely in these “failures” wherein melodrama's potentials lie. Melodrama disavows depth and a sense of interiority, through the projection of thought and sentiment onto the surfaces of bodies. In this case, female bodies are the surfaces upon which melodrama produces ideas of subjectivity premised on relationalities between

proximate bodies. Melodrama offers models of subjectivity that are relational and based upon inter-subjectivity. As a result, they are not reliant on ideas of sameness or belonging implied in the models proffered by the state. Such an understanding of relationality, one that is based upon affective ties, forces the subject to consider the other not as an entity that is always already understood as a type (i.e., *Ayah* is Shanta, not Hindu, etc.) but rather as a “whatever,” according to Giorgio Agamben, or as a singularity.⁴⁰ Moreover, his sense of being, as “being such that it always matters,” recasts the question of what materiality is defining as the real in realism as it is understood in the aesthetic debates of Ray and others or in the corresponding realist narratives offered by state-sponsored history. One is forced to consider the materiality of affect in determining subjectivity, a process that the state assumes and seeks to mask, particularly with regard to difference. If the state succeeds in channeling affect to its own ends by seeing and indeed appropriating its value, the desire for a more “usable” future, albeit couched in the idiom and iconographies of public and perhaps even low culture, should not prevent us from failing to see that, through, affect melodrama matters.

⁴⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Agamben stresses that the conceptualization of this singularity is possible only, however, when we consider it as a part of a series. This argument has implications for Anderson’s concept of serial citizenship wherein the demand for singularity within a group can be maintained. Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

CHAPTER 4

“A GASH IN THE REEL”: SPECTRAL SUBJECTS IN SALMAN RUSHDIE’S *MIDNIGHT’S CHILDREN*

Deemed one of the best fictional accounts of Indian independence, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980) has been widely translated, garnered numerous prizes, and has been acclaimed by the academy and public alike.¹ Following the publication of his most well-known work, *The Satanic Verses* (1989), however, the dramatic events of the “Rushdie affair” guaranteed that the latter text would surpass the circulation of *Midnight’s Children* and indeed go on to become one of the most circulated texts in the world.² Despite Rushdie’s clash with public and state detractors from members of the political right and left in mainstream media, *Midnight’s Children* went on to receive the Booker of Bookers, an unprecedented honor, and Rushdie continues to receive critical recognition for his incomparable use of language and unique style of magical realism.

The novel’s protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is represented as having extraordinary talents for reading his fellow citizens’ hearts and minds, and this feature in particular suggests that the novel belongs under the rubric of magical realism, as it is indeed most often read. I argue, however, that an overlooked but unmistakable element of the novel’s language is the narration of the nation and Saleem’s story in the style of the “epic melodrama,” a modern mythical register that offers us a better understanding of the novel

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (New York: Penguin, 1980). All subsequent references are to this edition with page numbers included in parentheses in the text.

² Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1989).

than allegory, the concept upon which magical realism is predicated.³ Displacing stock Hindi film conventions, such as impersonation onto the novel's protagonist and coincidence onto the plot, the novel's allusions and extended examinations of temporality and references to cinema suggest ekphrasis, the literary representation of visual and other expressive forms as the guiding logic of the novel's narration rather than allegory.⁴ A focus on the ekphrastic elements of the novel, moreover, offers us understandings of the spectral route undertaken by the circulation of the novel, particularly in its failed form as a failed film, the analysis of which follows.

In 1996, nearly a decade after the Rushdie affair, during which the *fatwah* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini sparked state intervention on a global scale and led to the censorship of *The Satanic Verses* in many countries, Rushdie faced a less publicized, but nonetheless trenchant conflict, with state repression, the terms of which profoundly influenced the circulation of his work. That year Rushdie attempted to co-produce a five-part film series that would be included in the state's fiftieth-anniversary celebrations in conjunction with the BBC, Bangalore-based Odyssey Films, and filmmakers in India. The screenplay, written by Rushdie and based on *Midnight's Children*, was subject to over one hundred cuts by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.⁵ Upon reception of the screenplay, the state-report included the following cuts:

³ Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88.

⁴ In my usage of ekphrasis as literary language regarding cinema, I elaborate the term as described by Mitchell in reference to visual images. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁵ In the past, the ministry has been known for issuing indiscriminate cuts on films much to filmmakers' dismay. The demands of the ministry demonstrate a predilection for reform in popular cinema. In the case of Rushdie's screenplay, the cuts demanded seem not as arbitrary, however, and are framed as attempts to placate potential unrest. For a brief introduction to the history of censorship, see Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to*

Aadam Sinai sees his future wife through a hole in a sheet. It should not be allowed because Muslims might be upset.
Delete.

There's no authentic proof of a letter from the first prime minister to the baby Saleem, born on August 15. "It's highly improbable that the first prime minister had time for such matters."
Delete.

Why should a child whose parentage is Christian be named Shiva?
Delete.

The President of Pakistan is shown naked while sleeping in his bedroom.
Delete.

Why should the colours of the national flag be repeated in the room where Saleem Sinai's mother is?
Delete.⁶

In response to these cuts, Rushdie and the BBC resubmitted a revised and renamed script, *Saleem's Story*, to the Broadcasting Ministry in 1998. The script remained censored: the state denied permission again on the grounds that they feared the series might exacerbate existing tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the wake of ongoing violence over Kashmir in India and Pakistan or ignite other similar conflicts.⁷ The failure of his film adaptation of *Midnight's Children*, the only text to have been honored with the Booker of

Popular Hindi Cinema (New York: Routledge, 2004). For the relationship between censorship and the representation of gender and sexuality, see Monika Mehta, "What is behind film censorship? The *Khalnayak* Debates," *Gender & Censorship*, ed. Brinda Bose (New Delhi: Women Unlimited 2006): 170–187.

⁶ Kaveree Bamzai, "Water 2000? Shades of Midnight, circa 1996," *Express India* (2000; accessed 25 November 2006), <<http://www.expressindia.com/ie/daily/20000303/ina03044.html>>.

⁷ To date, violence in the Kashmir region, where militant Muslim groups have been fighting the Indian army in the contest over offering Kashmiri residents autonomy over the region, has taken over 50,000 lives and displaced tens of thousands of others, according to Human Rights Watch, "Country Summary: India," *World Report 2007* (January 2007; accessed 25 November 2006), <<http://www.hrw.org/legacy/wr2k7/pdfs/india.pdf>>.

Bookers Prize, was censored by the Indian state before production relegated his screenplay to oblivion, and the film was never made.

The failed public circulation of this phantom text provoked a number of questions for me, which organize this chapter: Why did the filmic adaptation of such a globally celebrated novel paradoxically provoke the state to shut down the text's cinematic circulation? What threat—actual or imagined—did the proposed adaptation pose? Why do understandings of the novel as magical realism fail to explain or even emphasize this act of state censorship by democratic and free press?

In an effort to better understand how this literary and cinematic adaptation seemed to produce public effects, I focus on three aspects of this literary and cinematic “failure.” Firstly, I examine the limited potential for magical realism and realism as useful frameworks for elucidating postcolonial politics of representation and language. Indeed, a focus on the significant role of cinematic logic in the construction of *Midnight's Children* allows us to better understand the state's censorship of Rushdie's adaptation of the novel into the film, and, in turn, this failed attempt allows us to see how postcolonial melodrama, as I define it, permits a reframing and reproduction of secular subjectivity. As a form that links individuals along affective axes, cinematic mediation of literary language allows us better to understand how the novel configures the parallel development of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, with that of the one thousand other children born at the moment of India's independence and, indeed, potentially that of Saleem's story with the reading public. This process occurs through the consumption of literature as public culture, an aspect of Rushdie's work elided by magical realist understandings.

Secondly, I examine the problems posed to the state by Rushdie's use of ekphrasis as melodrama in the novel and screenplay. In an alleged attempt to forestall the expression of the audience's affective response, the state assessed that anticipated spectatorial response to and formal elements of melodrama would be potentially harmful for the public. It suppressed melodramatic representation in the screenplay. It justified its act of censorship, moreover, by appealing to stereotypes of Muslim minority responses as extremist and violent and by implying that more realistic representations of historical events and figures were warranted. By recasting a particular demand for realism, which Rajagopal has termed "Hindu national realism," a mode wherein masses attribute causes to collective action in state-sponsored media purporting to represent objective events, the state maintained stereotypes generated by an earlier precedent it had set. The representation of justified aggression exhibited by the Gujarat-state government against Muslim minorities in Godhra in 2002 was made possible by public attribution of just cause to brutal and illegal acts by the state. In large part, public sentiment in support of state action was garnered through media images deployed as documentary-influenced reportage representing selective and stereotypical images of aggressive Muslim mobs. These images were then linked as causal elements to the state's violence in the audience's imagination, a process that underscored the importance of stereotypical media images and their convergence with journalistic reportage for the forwarding of political aims.⁸

⁸ Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

In Rushdie's proposed film, the state objected to the juxtaposition of the narrator's imagined visualizations on the one hand, and to the sanitized state accounts on the other hand, on the grounds that the comparison and alternative viewpoint bring the state's authority into question. In the Censor Board's cuts mentioned earlier, the state objects to the potential for diverging accounts of historically significant moments likely to be recalled by Indian readers. Though the state's act of censorship was presented as a preemptive measure allegedly to protect citizens from the Muslim community's violent protest, these types of legislative acts and policy decisions contradict the Indian state's claim to secular democracy based on free speech and equal treatment under the law. In censoring Rushdie's adaptation through a stereotypical typecasting of audiences, these censoring acts explicitly exclude Muslims from the category of citizen and serve instead to reveal the state's repressive role in undermining actual secularism.

These acts of censorship find justification in stereotypes of minority communities and defy ideas of universality and commensurability, concepts upon which democratic institutions in secular India are premised. For example, the idea of citizenship suggests seriality or an unbounded notion of belonging to the nation as equals.⁹ The disavowal of serial and commensurable notions of national subjects results in one idealized citizenry and another phantom citizenry made up of minorities. Absent in presence, stereotypes of these spectral minoritized groups are produced through cinematic and televisual media images whose circulation is largely unsurpassed by other sites of media. These images serve as proxies for

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

individuals held responsible for affective responses their images might solicit.¹⁰ The state's fear of representation foregrounds the important role that film, much of which is melodramatic, plays in potentially mediating public affective responses and accounts for Rushdie's use of ekphrasis in the novel.

Lastly, I examine melodramatic episodes in the screenplay and novel to understand what sorts of critiques or alternative concepts of secularism these moments of ekphrasis suggest. If the state relies on the crucial ideological work performed by the mode of "Hindu national realism,"¹¹ Rushdie's use of melodrama in the novel and proposed film adaptation challenges the reality effect and truth value of this national realism, I argue, through his re-casting of the tropes of impersonation and coincidence in order to redeem lowbrow narrative strategies.¹² At the same time, Rushdie's recourse to melodrama as ekphrasis counters the demand for a realist aesthetics on the left and the homogenizing implications of magical realism as a rubric. Rushdie focuses on the ghostly quality of film in producing a spectral citizen-subject and the subjunctive temporality of this ghostly image, which simultaneously suggests itself and its aspiration. Finally, the closing sections of the chapter consider the role of alternative conceptions of secular subjectivity suggested by melodrama. These senses of citizenship are based

¹⁰ These are the representations described by Arvind Rajagopal.

¹¹ Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹² While I do hold on to Chakravarty's sense of "imperso-nation," or the idea that Indian postcolonial identity is constructed from representations of masquerade, caricature, and contamination, in other words—hybrid constructions rather than an original identity—my use of impersonation is intended to focus on the performance of these roles, either by the actors on screen or by the spectator projecting onto the screen from the audience. Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947–1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

on equality, seriality, and social justice, the betrayal of whose concepts are marked by Rushdie's novel and the failed phantom film text or adaptation.¹³

The "magic" of movie melodrama

Though capacious as a generic category, magical realism proves inadequate to capture the excess of cinematic melodrama represented in Rushdie's novel. In *Midnight's Children*, as well as in *Satanic Verses*, two of the most well known of Rushdie's oeuvre, narratives are overly determined by the logic of film melodrama and of movies in general.¹⁴ If magical realism, particularly in works of Latin American authors such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez, pursues a marvelous understanding of historical events in order to access vernacular forms of narration repressed by colonialism, the status of magic in *Midnight's Children* functions less along folk or allegorical modes and more along another kind of magic, that of the popular mediated "magic" of movies. The films referred to by Rushdie, particularly mythologies, may be based on pre-modern myths, nonetheless, they are the product of the very modern phenomenon of cinema. Rather than the representation of falsification, denial, or mutating of reality suggested by the magic of magical realism, the logic of overlapping reality and fantasy exhibited in Indian films is largely responsible for the enchantment effect of Rushdie's texts.¹⁵

Postcolonial difference emerges through cinematic mediation of melodrama. Through circuits of spectatorial address, impersonation,

¹³ I draw here on Anderson's work on bound and unbound nationalism wherein bound citizenship can be conceptualized according to the idea of a series. Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

¹⁴ Rushdie admits his love affair with cinema, in interviews and criticism quite openly. Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: British Film Institute, 1992).

¹⁵ Michael Valdez Moses, "Magical Realism at World's End," *Literary Imagination* 3 (2001): 105–133.

response, and cinematic images provoke spectatorial mimesis through the reconfiguration of affective lines. Cinematic conventions of impersonation and embodiment with reference to the spectator's or screen actor's bodies bring together the temporalities of consumption, production, and circulation.¹⁶ When these aspects of filmic address and spectatorship are experienced as private in public spaces of cinema hall, village squares, or places of work such as the drawing room of an employer, these viewing experiences reanimate relationality, thereby giving rise to new ways of conceptualizing co-existence as inter-subjectivity. Thematically, these narratives often feature representations of minority figures or subaltern characters affecting the course of state history by interrupting the regulation of bodies within the project of serial citizenship and modernization through impersonation. Rushdie's literary and proposed filmic narratives suggest potentially novel ways of conceptualizing secular subjectivity and relationality based on practices of the imagination generated by cinema.

In particular, the studies of the novel as magical realism premise themselves on allegorical understandings of the fantastic represented in realist terms to make sense of postcolonial modernity. These perspectives do not adequately take into account the novel's reliance on language mediated by cinematic logic, which might appear to juxtapose, on the one hand, science, technology, and empirical knowledge (i.e., reason) and on the other hand, those aspects that constitute magical realism or what appears to be supernatural and therefore deemed magical realism. In fact, it is precisely at

¹⁶ Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947–1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

the site of the seemingly sacred, that ideas of secular subjectivity are generated.

Integrating into language this preoccupation of cinema—the visual and audio representations of temporality—Rushdie remakes the language of postcolonial writing to address the space of representation in between the visual and literary. By experimenting with cinematic techniques such as impersonation and identification, Rushdie integrates cinematic strategies of cutting between perspectives and directly addressing the spectator. These techniques produce a literary text that challenges understandings of realism that an institution such as the state relies on in its endeavors to control and limit external mediation of its self-representation, particularly the representation that the image projected indexes itself as it really exists.¹⁷

The interruption of the state's realist representation is Rushdie's most important formal intervention. The language of the novel grounds the movement of affect, so that the expression of culture as public now embodies literal signs. Between cinema and literature, Rushdie's literary is transformed and renders the spectral cinematic image simultaneously cinematic and literary. Herein lies the motivation for state censorship: while Rushdie's critique of the state could be overlooked in the novel, the reach of its film adaptation, the promise of which is already laid out in the cinematic language of the novel, potentially makes sense to a wider audience for whom melodramatic rendering might provoke a critical re-examination of history through their own affective responses. Those limited few who read would be much more likely to have access to the novel while many more who make up

¹⁷ Ian P. Watt, *The Rise Of The Novel: Studies In Defoe, Richardson And Fielding* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1957).

much of the audience of popular cinema have access to cinema which is a spectral medium even as it is contained on a videotape or DVD. The signification of this embodiment takes an in-between temporal from “a line of flight” or, more specifically, a representation that aspires to materialize otherwise, as an entity that occupies the time of the subjunctive. It simultaneously projects itself as a novel, but then, also in another form, it aspires to be namely as a documentary account of history’s events from the point of view of Saleem’s cinematically mediated imagination.

Demand for realism on the left

The state’s demand for realism in national narrative served to censor alternative accounts as suggested by the example of Rushdie’s screenplay. Paradoxically, a demand for realist art is echoed in the criticisms of progressive secular critics, who like Rushdie, also critique the monolithic self-representation of the state and its oppression of minorities.¹⁸ These arguments for social progress, however, too often prescribe realism as the only mode capable of critique and documentation of resistance or agency. Their prescriptions are blind to the normalization of realism as an ideology, as in the case of “Hindu nationalist realism,” which fails to represent minorities and misses the fact that realism is not transparent.¹⁹ In dismissing magical realism and fantastical literature such as Rushdie’s as postmodern, these criticisms

¹⁸ Admittedly, as an alternative to magical realism as an account of all postcolonial literature as national allegory, the reference to the multiplicity of genres constituting this literature is a necessary counter. See: Ahmed Aijaz, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 15 (autumn 1987): 3–25; and Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (autumn 1986): 65–88.

¹⁹ See for example the debate between Sumit Sarkar and Dipesh Chakrabarty where the latter defends subaltern studies scholarship on the grounds that realist history is the provenance of the postcolonial elite no less than that of left and Marxist intellectuals. Sumit Sarkar, “Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies,” *Writing Social History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 82–108.

overlook melodramatic or fantastic form's ability to impede the ideological work by throwing into crisis the sense of temporality that undergirds Hindu nationalist realism.

One such argument for realism is launched by Aijaz Ahmad, who argues that Rushdie's work fails to ask questions in a realist mode, the manner Ahmad deems necessary for documenting ordinary people engaging in progressive change in South Asia.²⁰ Written in response to Rushdie's *Shame* (Year?), Ahmad's argument relating to realism is nonetheless relevant for *Midnight's Children*. In his essay, he laments the canonization of the author's entire oeuvre into that of Third-World literature because the institutionalization of Rushdie's work heralds the foreclosure of realist inquiry in literature. According to him, Rushdie's work marginalizes the crucial questions of realism—literary influences, experiential locations, political affiliations, and representations of class and gender—to emphasize one question: how to give form to the national experience.²¹ Arguing that these preoccupations, emergent in and productive of fragmentary narration, disallow a realist reading, Ahmad critiques Rushdie's inability to portray the everydayness of postcolonial experience because realism presumes a total experience that includes more than just fragments:

What this excludes—"the missing bits" to which he must "reconcile" himself—is the dailiness of lives lived under oppression, and the human bonding of resistance, of decency, of innumerable heroisms of both ordinary and extraordinary kinds—which makes it possible for large numbers of people to look each other in the eye, without guilt,

²⁰ Aijaz Ahmad, "Rushdie's *Shame*: Postmodernism, Migrancy, and the Representation of Woman," *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992): 123–158.

²¹ Because of the author's alleged complicity in the development of the aesthetic and political frameworks of modernism and postmodernism, Ahmad takes issue with Rushdie's representation of the national experience which celebrates the condition of migrancy and the excess of belongings, experiences of identity that are shared by postcolonial and modernist/postmodernist authors alike.

with affection and solidarity and humour, and makes life, even under oppression, endurable and frequently joyous. Of that other kind of life his fictions, right up to *The Satanic Verses*, seem to be largely ignorant; what his imagination makes of the subsequent experience we shall find out only from later work.²²

According to Ahmad, Rushdie's representations have no real engagement with the people's postcolonial experience, which for him is an experience of everyday resistance. The elision of positive representations of subaltern figures, women, and lower- class and -caste individuals marks Rushdie's literature as elite. Ahmad argues for an expression of reality wherein experiences of "resistance," "solidarity," and "oppression," by virtue of their collective and conventionally political nature, lend themselves to a particular characterization of the everyday.²³ He emphasizes Rushdie's lack of realism, "these missing bits," however, while failing to acknowledge what his own demand for realism omits: representations of social practices that transpire outside the public sphere and an engagement with the subaltern and popular elements of Rushdie's style. In ignoring Bollywood melodrama and its vernacular underpinnings, Ahmad misses a key narrative strategy of Rushdie's, namely that of highlighting affective responses to everyday sorts of trials and tribulations that characterize postcolonial transitions to the point of excess, even to the point of un-representability in a recognizable realist idiom.

²² Jacqueline Stewart's essay on humor and negotiated readings in African American audiences in the 1930s demonstrates how stereotypes can be undone through spectatorial laughter and self-reflective comedy. By analogy, such an argument could be made in the context of Muslims coerced to watch stereotypical representations of themselves in Bollywood films. Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005).

²³ Their basis is in movements and social formations that seem to require a polemical and didactic fiction or representations that call for naturalist representations for which there are literary precedents in postcolonial fiction including the work of the Progressive Writers' Movement in South Asia as literature which Ahmad praises. Aijaz Ahmad, "Rushdie's *Shame*: Postmodernism, Migrancy, and the Representation of Woman," *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992): 123–158.

I argue that the form Rushdie uses to express this excess opens up the question of determining what a postcolonial modernity might mean by grappling with the question of the very reality that constitutes that modernity, a question the state's censorship of the possible film adaptation seeks to silence and that Ahmad forecloses.

The idea that representation of resistance is synonymous with realism overlooks the fact that many modes can represent resistance. Indeed, the state justifies itself by casting its duplicitous intentions as benevolent because they are in a realist mode. It appeals to techniques of documentation, i.e., causality and linearity, to establish what it deems real in a historical sense. As a result, Rushdie's fiction therefore attempts to counter the transparency assumed in the realist narrative of the state but also of those on the left who argue that realist prose and art is the privileged mode of expressing dissent. Rushdie's fiction, therefore, makes an intervention in the context of conservative state and progressive politics.

In contrast to Ahmad's narrow definition of the real and to the state's definition of secularism as Hindu nationalism, Rushdie offers us accounts of various encounters with the real including our understanding of it as an affective material relation and forces us to contend simultaneously with a difficult premise—that the “human bonding” of resistance and decency are not merely the provenance of the public but emerge also from the private and intimate grappling of politicization. An examination of the construction, effect, and elusivity of the real forces us to examine what we mean by the term political in the first place if we think of private resistance as constitutive of reality. A consideration of these terms along affective lines as opposed to solely rational lines provides the concept of “experience” a sense of

materiality, which idealized social realist literature dismisses but upon which filmic melodrama depends.²⁴ The translation of this visually mediated sense of experience into literary language emerges again and again in Rushdie's work.

Cinematic bodies as spectral citizens

Rushdie's interest in the overlap between the literary and the visual is evident in his writing both preceding and following *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's preoccupations with films, film-actors, paintings, painters, models, and photographers dominate his work, constituting an imaginary field in which visual and linguistic compete to represent what is signified. That Rushdie's text draws on visual culture has also been noted by critic Martin Zerlang, who refers to *Midnight's Children* as a "verbal Bombay film."²⁵ Like many authors following the visual turn of the 19th century, which made possible the re-conceptualization of time through cinema, Rushdie draws upon filmic techniques such as "close-ups, flashbacks, cross-cuts, slow motion, fast motion, double exposure," which alter our understanding of novelistic language and temporality. For example, the imperative to offer accounts of the nation pushes Rushdie into a form of narration recalling the serial action genre encompassed by melodrama. The episodic structure runs like a serial,

²⁴ Ahmad, "Notes Towards a Category," 123–158. Ahmad here posits the writing of the Progressive Writer's Association as the epitome of socially responsible realist literature. While it is true that under the aegis of the national organization, many authors flourished and were prolific in various vernacular languages, at the same time, in-fighting and dissent from the communist parties of India led to its demise even if a branch of it still exists today. What is absent from Ahmad's narrative, however, is the link between some of these writers and the film industry. For example, well-known authors Sadaat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi, and Sahir Ludhianvi wrote screenplays and songs for popular films of the 1950s and 1960s. See: Sadaat Hasan Manto, *Stars from Another Sky: The Bombay Film World in the 1940s* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

²⁵ Martin Zerlang, "A Close-up on Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," *City Flicks: Indian cinema and the Urban Experience*, ed. Preben Kaarsholm (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

which allows Saleem as narrator to speed up and slow down the narration as events recalled demand, as Zerlang describes:

At one point Saleem defines himself as “the sort of person to whom things have been done” (Rushdie 1982: 237), and therefore he, of course, fits in perfectly within the genre of the Bombay film industry: the melodrama. Combining the high level of action of the adventure film with the passivity of the hero/victim in horror film, Saleem would be the perfect melodramatic hero if comic distance did not accompany his sufferings. (Rushdie 1982: 192).²⁶

Ironically, following the failure of his uncle Aziz, who battles the Bombay film industry to make films about ordinary people, Saleem’s life imitates art so that his uncle’s film project documenting lives of ordinary workers in a pickle factory serves as the plot outline for the actual narrative of Saleem’s life. Zerlang argues that Saleem’s account, characterized as it is by melodramatic excess, succeeds in offering a total picture where paradoxically his uncle’s effort to represent the reality of everyday experience in realist terms falls short. The inclusion of the cinematic as entertainment allows Rushdie to represent the “message” of the resignation over historical denials and state amnesia in a “medium that tells another story.”²⁷ In other words, the failures of the state are couched in an accessible and engaging medium—film.

Drawing upon, but also departing from, Zerlang’s analysis, I argue that the melodramatic mode structures the novel, encompassing the others—action, comedy, and the critique of social realism. A feature that distinguishes melodrama as an aesthetics of “failure” from previous melodrama is its focus on temporality that is contingent on the idea of spectrality. Although upon first reading the novel appears to center on Saleem as its protagonist, upon

²⁶ Zerlang, “A Close-up.”

²⁷ Zerlang, “A Close-up.”

closer inspection it becomes apparent that Saleem is truly “handcuffed to history,” while other characters, certain female characters in particular, dynamically but unexpectedly alter the course of events and serve as agents of change. The plenitude of affective response corresponds to, or can be perceived as, the absence of expression in non-affective (i.e., realist) terms, particularly with regard to femininity. The inclusion of melodrama, particularly through recurrent visual elements, similarly complicates our understanding of the process of literary signification. Melodramatic mediation alternatively centers on women by emphasizing the body as a key node or site of signification, while simultaneously consolidating capitalist patriarchal institutions. Cinema as a spectral entity thereby becomes productive of subaltern subjectivity. Galvanized by spontaneous but uncannily strategic impulses, they interrupt the narrative flow and disrupt the march of time to its intended end, i.e., that destination that delegates such individuals to minor roles occupying the margins of elite history.

The novel initiates an association of cinema, spectrality, and representation of femininity in its remarkable recounting of the meeting of Doctor Aadam Aziz and his future wife, Naseem, whose acquaintance he acquires through repeated but partial examinations of her young but failing body. Obligated to follow the ordinances of her overprotective father and vigilant chaperones, Dr. Aziz examines his patient’s body part by part through the small circular opening of a white sheet. Rather than constituting the subject of this scene, she is reduced to a ghostly object, viewed by Aadam Aziz, the privileged point of view in the narration. Aziz’s point of view is framed by a hole in the sheet, a sort of camera eye that mediates vision. Unable to speak to or see her freely, Dr. Aziz is driven mad by his fragmented

image of her, an image that is suggestive but fails to satisfy his curiosity or desire because of its incompleteness:

So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly fitting collage of her severally inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him, and not only in his dreams. Glued together by his imagination, she accompanied him on all his rounds, she moved into the front room of his mind, so that waking and sleeping he could feel in his fingertips the softness of her ticklish skin or the perfect tiny wrists or the beauty of the ankles; he could smell the scent of lavender and chameli; he could hear her voice and the helpless laughter of a little girl; but she was headless, because he had never seen her face. (22)

Naseem's body parts imprint themselves upon his memories through extreme close-ups such that detail of skin, texture, consistency, and musculature incorporate themselves into fantasies which later return to haunt him. Using conventions of the close-up and framing, Rushdie demonstrates how the visibility of the body shapes the possibility for subjective spectatorial response and the role of gesture in filmic melodrama makes meaning. Aadam takes in Naseem's body serially, part-by-part, scene-by-scene, so that limbs, muscles, veins, and skin episodically disclose the underlying reality of her unspoken repression under *purdah*. The screen of the perforated sheet becomes the surface of signification so that the spectral quality of her failed citizenship projects in a sequence of shots of her body, haunting the spectator in its repetition of absence and presence. Naseem's cut-up body, like film spliced into shots, proliferates and reproduces like light rendered murky by emulsified celluloid.

This passage establishes an alternative history of Naseem's body, which remains sequestered through the fulfillment of Indian personal law and its patriarchal interpretation of Islamic custom. This is made possible in part due to the state's intervention, an inheritance of colonial personal laws and

minority conventions of *purdah*.²⁸ The state thereby secures its power along axes of biopolitics: the regulation of women's bodies in the name of secular policy forces the inscription of the law. This passage demonstrates ways that the nexus of cinema, censorship, and patriarchal ideology under the rubric of present day secular policy reduces Naseem to a ghost or spectral presence upon which Aziz projects his imagination.

The examination of these conventions, which the state deems religious, therefore provocative, reveals the state's attempt to maintain sovereignty with the aid of patriarchal leadership in Muslim communities: state cinematic mediation renders a figure like Naseem spectral and incomplete. Made "helpless" and "headless" by the denial of asserting her will regarding control over the visibility and mobility of her own body, she is left vulnerable to the authority of those patriarchal figures and leaders who constitute the state and support a secular policy which maintains these customs in the name of protecting minority difference. The novel and proposed film adaptation asserts her spectral citizenship by drawing a comparison to the simultaneously visible and invisible qualities of the *purdah* or veil, and the figure of the ghost, embodied in Naseem and Aadam's tenuous relation to her.

Aziz's experience of falling in love with fragmented images of close-up shots of Naseem's body emerges from a visually mediated interaction, an experience not entirely dissimilar from watching a typical Bollywood film, which until the 1980s implicitly censored the depiction of kissing and physical

²⁸ This is an example of *sarva dharma, sarva bhava*. Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, *In a Minority: Essays on Muslim Women in India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I. Rudolph, "Living with Difference in India: Legal Pluralism and Legal Universalism in Historical Context," *Religion and Personal Law in India: A Call to Judgment*, ed. Gerald James Larson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001): 36–65.

intimacy.²⁹ Filmmakers used curious, if not comical, arrangements of props and setting within the mise-en-scène and framing of the shots to represent expressions of desire or physical contact, such as shaking shrubs covering the hero or heroine who are presumably engaged in an intimate or sexual act. Rushdie himself describes one such convention—"the indirect kiss"—in the novel. The hero and heroine kiss a glass and pass it along to the lover, who in turn kisses it back and returns it. Here, the representation of desire ensues not through the arrangement of mise-en-scène but through camera framing and the elicitation of desire through the close-up. After the ban on kissing was lifted, interestingly, films continued to edit kissing scenes even if they were now legally permitted. This act of self-censorship has produced a unique circumstance wherein popular films might favor frequent representations of hypersexual dances and displays while avoiding representations of private acts of kissing and other intimate acts. Gopalan describes the process of ideology in censorship at work:

Far from perfectly aligning with the interests of the state and the film industry, the viewer is drawn into a fetishistic scenario where she or he oscillates between a cinephiliac mourning over lost footage on the one hand and, on the other, acknowledges that the state employs patriarchal laws to produce limits on seeing.³⁰

The state's prohibition on representations of intimate relations and the resulting spectatorial mourning helps us to understand how cinephilia experience shapes subjective response. Rushdie's emphasis on Naseem's objectification as a ghost, particularly her in-between quality of spectral embodiment in *pardah*, reveals how the screened image makes an impression

²⁹ Madhava Prasad, "Cinema and the Desire for Modernity," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25–26 (1993): 71–86.

³⁰ Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute 2002): 21.

on the mind of the spectator. This passage illustrates how the reverse process occurs: actual parts of Naseem's body are transformed into spectral images of a headless woman. Just as filmic representation, even in the excessive mode of melodrama, cannot succeed in representing totality, the visibility of Muslim women free of veils does not stand in for the subject. Rushdie's use of melodrama demonstrates how women subject to patriarchal personal laws circulate as haunted specters. Nonetheless, neither veiling nor censorship can make the specter of a living and material entity disappear entirely.³¹

This scene demonstrates the role that cinematic ideology plays in reproducing patriarchal regulation of women's bodies. The recognition of this fact in realist terms still does little to dissolve the ideological grip of the patriarchal state. In this acquaintance between Dr. Aziz and Naseem, her fragmented body bears the trace of state secular policy with regard to Muslim minorities and personal laws, particularly women, who shoulder the burden of incorporating this legislation onto their bodies through the practice of *purdah*. Indian secular policy furthers her state of spectrality by privileging the Hindu male as ideal citizen and stereotyping the Muslim as male and violent, erasing her altogether.

³¹ It is important to mention here that, of course, there are women who claim the practice of wearing the veil is a matter of personal choice or habit. The claim implies access to a certain amount of autonomy with regard to women's responses to personal laws; I do not believe it is a fact that bears on the construction of personal laws. These women are seldom a part of the legislating body that determines and implements the personal law.

Melodrama and the subjunctive mode³²

Midnight's Children opens with the protagonist, Saleem Sinai, narrating to his lover, Padma, the events of his remarkable life, which coincide with landmark historical events since the mutual birth of Saleem and the nation-state on August 15, 1947. The novel describes Saleem as "handcuffed to history," while his body deteriorates, a description which accounts for the widespread view that Saleem stands in for the fragmented body politic of postcolonial India. He races against the march of time to recount his family's past and history of migration to Bombay, the site of his birth and discovery of "midnight's children," one thousand other children, who because of their shared time of birth at the time of independence, enjoy a special mode of communication as a marker of their bond. The idea that Saleem telepathically communicates with the thousand other babies born on the day of independence leads to the conventional understanding of the novel as magical.

I argue that the proposed filmic adaptation of the novel's melodramatic moments challenge the representation of history as allegory and the novel as magical realism. These episodes deploy the subjunctive mode to make meaning, recasting these irrational elements by offering material representations or scenarios of what was solely understood as allegorical.³³ If simultaneous consumption of print culture once served as the basis for individuals to imagine the community of their nation, *Midnight's Children* suggests an analogous model based on cinema as that which relates

³² Veena Das, "The Making of Modernity: Gender and Time in Indian Cinema," *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 166–188.

³³ Das, "Making of Modernity," 166–188.

individuals across differences of language, literacy, and access.³⁴ At the same time, this simultaneous consumption and representation of history in melodramatic terms—elite accounts of history juxtaposed with personal histories—allow the novel to counter dominant accounts with Saleem’s wished for history or hoped for future.

Referring to the city’s cinematic cast of colorful characters, Saleem asserts, “Everyone in Bombay should have a film vocabulary.” It is also through this film vocabulary that he also learns the secret of his switched identity with Shiva, the only one of midnight’s children who threatens Saleem and the peaceful cohort of the rest of midnight’s children. Switched at birth by Mary Pereira, the woman who would go on to be his nurse, Saleem’s fate coincidentally sidelines him into a radically different life than the one into which his counterpart, Shiva, is forced. The impersonation of one by the other and the equation of the one-thousand-and-one midnight’s children result in the representation of the uneven workings of serial citizenship, where the commensurability of universal right is not borne out by the inequality of social conditions. Rushdie here cites melodramatic inter-text, that of the filmic genre of babies switched at birth to represent the workings of failures of citizenship premised on serial subjects. The fact of his switched identity automatically destabilizes the assumption that all Muslims fall under the stereotypical category the state assumes: religious, extremist, terrorist. Saleem, as the “bad copy,” undoes the primacy of the ideal Hindu man as authentic and originary.

Rather than conceive of this frame story simply as one that can be explained through allegorical representation, however, I argue that the

³⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso 1989).

adaptation, *Saleem's Story*, forces the reader and spectator to consider how or whether allegory would be realized through the material medium of his proposed film. This proposed project adds another layer of explanation and "common sense" to those magical elements in *Midnight's Children*, namely that those effects are determined by a cinematic framework and account for the novel's ekphrastic approach. Rushdie's own early cinephilia with Hollywood, as a Muslim boy growing up in the elite, secular, cosmopolitanism of Bombay, combined with cultural immersion in the urban and syncretic festivals of Ganesh Chaturthi and Bollywood star culture offer Rushdie a unique take on "epic melodrama," where the devotional film form in garishly striking style overlaps with popular and epic representations of the history of India as narrated by the elephant-god, Ganesha.³⁵ The use of this frame of storytelling foregrounds another example of impersonation: Saleem as narrator takes on the identity of the Hindu god, Ganesha, the remover of obstacles and scribe to Vyasa, none other than the supposed author of the epic *Mahabharata*.³⁶

The impersonation of a deity by a well-known actor falls entirely within the understanding of realism, as it is understood in the Indian popular cinematic context. That a Muslim character such as Saleem could impersonate or represent Ganesha, the Hindu god of learning and the scribe of the history

³⁵ Ganesh Chaturthi is a Hindu festival, popular in the state of Maharashtra, and celebrated with much fanfare in Bombay. Celebrating the arrival of the deity Ganesha to earth, devotees make life-size idols of the figure and after worshiping it submerge it into lakes and the ocean. Initially a private and family festival, the religious rituals assumed a social and anti-colonial character with the nationalist figure Lokmanya Tilak in the 19th century. The figure of Ganesha was seen to be a deity to whom high caste Brahmins, as well as low castes, had access. The immersion of the idol then became the site of social discussion and political mobilization. As for Rushdie's cinephilia, evidence of it is evoked in Rushdie's recollection of Disney animals painted on his nursery walls, as well as his encounters with Hollywood and Bollywood in autobiographical accounts referred to for example in Rushdie's monograph on the film, *The Wizard of Oz*, which can be seen as another inter-text to this novel. Rushdie, *Wizard of Oz*.

³⁶ R. K. Narayan, *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

of the Indian nation, becomes less a matter of allegory and more a matter of actuality, albeit in controversial terms, when one considers similar cinematic impersonations by Muslim actors of Hindu character.³⁷ A review of a scene that might be read as magical realism yields another understanding of its significance when considered along the lines of the genre of the mythological movie:

There was a washing chest and a boy who sniffed too hard. His mother undressed and revealed a Black Mango. Voices came, which were not the voices of Archangels. A hand deafening the left ear. And what grew best in the heat: fantasy, irrationality, lust. There was a clocktower refuge, and cheater in class...And revelations, and closing of a mind; and exile... Until. (347–348)

Saleem's overly sensitive and large nose, an obvious phallic signifier, comes to life in response to the vision of his naked mother. In this re-telling of the emergence of Ganesha's elephant-head, Saleem impersonates Ganesha. Parvati, the wife of Shiva, desperate for a child, sloughs off her own flesh and makes a boy-child, Ganesha. With Shiva absent from their abode, she asks Ganesha to stand guard as she bathes. Upon Shiva's return, he encounters an apparent stranger, Ganesha, unbeknownst to him as his son. As Shiva proceeds, Ganesha blocks his entry and in a rage, Shiva angrily cuts off Ganesha's head. Amidst the din, Parvati emerges and clarifying the confusion, reduces Shiva to a state of remorse. In repentance, Shiva affixes the head of the first living being he encounters, an elephant, and the boy is

³⁷ While Muslim actors have acted as Hindu characters and performed in nationalist roles in Bollywood, the idea of a Muslim actor playing the role of a god in mythological films still raises much resistance on the part of Hindu nationalists. For example, Salman Khan, a Bollywood star, was slated to play the role of Ram in Raj Kumar Santoshi's film, *Ramayana*, based on the epic. Confronting death threats and protests, the actor opted out of the role with regret and was replaced by the Hindu actor, Ajay Devgan. See: Subash K. Jha, "Big B to Play Cool God in New Film," *Hindustan Times* (26 November 2007). For a history of mythological films in general, see: Rachel Dwyer, *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

brought to life as a figure resembling a human being with the head of an elephant.

In the novel's reworking of the myth, Saleem's father simply boxes in his ears when he is caught spying on Amina in the bath. In the act, Saleem's father knocks out Saleem's ability to hear the voices of the "midnight's children," but this gift is immediately replaced by Saleem's ability to know, in an example of inter-subjectivity, the minds and hearts of others. Much like the figure of Ganesha, whose body combined the human material of his mother and an anthropomorphized elephant head to create the deity representing acumen and knowledge, Saleem's failing body, with his overly perceptive trunk of a nose furnishes him with intuition of others that in turn is generative of rare model of inter-subjectivity. A re-examination of these moments of impersonation reveals that the narrative often focuses on the actual materiality of the body, known to Indian audiences through mythological representation in calendar art, comics, and folk representations rather than in the invocation of its allegorical function alone.

Another element of the novel elided by the focus on magical realism is the particular role of the subjunctive mode as it interrupts the linear temporality of realist historical representation. For example, the novel and filmic adaptation imagine alternative scenes that challenge elite narratives of particular historical events or personages, rendering the state's authority just one among many that might offer a narrative of the nation. The state, however, ensures its hegemony over Indian publics by insisting on a linear sense of temporality, which Rushdie undermines by strategically deploying elements of postcolonial melodrama such as the logic of simultaneity underlying impersonation. In the case of this alternative representation of the

state, Sanjay Gandhi, then member of Congress, engages in espionage, bringing to mind the corruption of Indira Gandhi's or "the Widow's" regime under the Emergency and her son's complicity in the implementation of her authoritarian measures.³⁸ The representation of a state official participating in "top secret" covert acts of deception casts doubt on the intentions of the supposedly benevolent state as this figure, a shadowy image of Sanjay Gandhi, engages in dubious behavior unfit for a politician.

The representation of the state as a whole is undone in particular by its unexpected personification of the state in the following scene from the screenplay: "A character who looks like Sanjay Gandhi, delivers a top secret folder to Mustafa, an enemy agent. Delete." In the novel, however, these events are represented as if they were documented. The use of the language of framing and stopping action creates the effect of time standing still: the representations offer the reader a moment to reflect and question the state's intentions. Indeed, those are the very still shots, moments of historical narrative that the state objects to in the proposed adaptation in *Saleem's Story*. Unable to assimilate those fictional moments into its historical narrative of progress, the state fails to see its desired reflection in the specter and therefore attempts to disable the critical potential of Rushdie's film by censoring it. This scene brings attention to the state history's revisionist account, not only the undemocratic policy of mandatory sterilization that Sanjay Gandhi initiated, but also Indira Gandhi's act of imposing martial law during Emergency which ran from 1975 to 1977. Sanjay Gandhi's repressive policies had the most consequences for subaltern individuals, particularly Muslims, represented by many of the novel's "midnight's children."

³⁸ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

While the official records represented his policy as merely consistent with Indira Gandhi's population control and poverty eradication movements, in fact the proposed film's representation puts into question the intentions and purposes of state policy by raising the topic of Sanjay Gandhi's involvement with less than scrupulous leaders.³⁹ What elite history relegated to rumor, the novel suggests as foul play. Not only does this representation personify the policy through its focus on Sanjay Gandhi, it suggests that with this sort of state benevolence, there is little distinction between the state and perceived threats of espionage from a so-called actual potential enemy, i.e., Pakistan.⁴⁰ If state sovereignty sustains itself through representing itself in a realist mode, thereby normalizing its version of history, then the proposed filmic representations depict the failure of state realism to figure truth indisputably, thereby undermining its power as uncontested and irrefutable. The proposed filmic representation, framed as if the spectator were eyewitness to the covered up story, also challenges the state by appealing to the viewer's engagement in the novel.

In conclusion, Rushdie's use of ekphrasis is premised on aesthetics organized around direct spectatorial address, particularly of a "corpothetic" sort, resulting in the fact that, therefore, the threat of the representation

³⁹ "Eliminate poverty" (*garibi hatao*) was Indira Gandhi's slogan during her campaign for prime minister and the fifth general election in March 1971. Her detractors from the Congress Party secured a large majority against her by organizing around the slogan, "Eliminate Indira," (*Indira hatao*). Unable to confide in her former supporters, Gandhi implemented the oppressive policies of the Emergency, also referred to as "The Reign of Terror" by relying on her son, Sanjay, who became an ardent participant and supporter of her plans which included: forced sterilization of the poor as a means of birth control; eviction of urban squatters and slum dwellers in Delhi; and cutting or denial of workers' wages. The Emergency lasted until January 18, 1977, and was followed by a release of Gandhi's critics from prison and the announcement of a general election for the March of that year. Pupul Jayakar, *Indira Gandhi: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1993) and Arun Shourie, *Symptoms of Fascism* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978).

⁴⁰ This is the scene logic echoed in the use of coincidence to demonstrate the concept of seriality in reference to substitutability and commensurability.

becomes multiplied.⁴¹ Not only does it challenge the state's account, it draws affective attention away from the state's alleged realist account, which lacks the same affective appeal. The pleasure of this direct address challenges the state's ability to interpolate the spectator as its citizen subject. The fixing of the Hindu subject as the ideal citizen hinges not only on focusing on him but also on disavowing minorities as stereotypical and other. Presently, this refers to individuals from the Muslim community. As we can see by the state's depiction of anticipated Muslim response to the proposed film, the definition of the Muslim other is predicated on presumptions of responses and attitudes towards gendered norms.

The state's assumption that the Muslim spectator will necessarily respond to the representation of Aadam's sighting of his future wife through a hole in a sheet with anger and violence only re-enforces the stereotypes that the state seeks to uphold.⁴² That spectators would assume women's honor and virtue has been defiled by the intrusive male gaze, or the camera eye, necessitates that we assume that this stereotypical Muslim male spectator's response is over-determined by his religious identity, that he cannot even maintain the critical distance necessary to appreciate the humor of the scene depicted.⁴³ More likely, had the film circulated diverse responses from Muslim spectators could reveal Muslim communities as individuals, thereby interrupting the state's stereotyping of Muslims. The state impedes the

⁴¹ Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*, 65.

⁴² See the censor's first deletion, for example: Aadam Sinai sees his future wife through a hole in a sheet. It should not be allowed because Muslims might be upset. Delete.

⁴³ Jacqueline Stewart's essay on humor and negotiated readings in African American audiences in the 1930s, who counter hegemonic Hollywood ones is a helpful case in explaining ways that stereotypes can be undone through spectatorial laughter and self-reflective comedy. By analogy, such an argument could be made in the context of Muslim coerced to watch stereotypical representations of themselves in Bollywood films. Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies*.

representation of these groups of viewers as complex and singular. Instead it reduces males to a mob in the making.

By assuming the spectator of the film to be a stereotypical Muslim male, moreover, the state not only profiles Muslim males, it refuses another Indian spectator the possibility for defining herself as secular or religiously tolerant, thereby diminishing her role as citizen subject. The state's reliance on subjecting Muslims to personal laws removes female Muslim spectators from the jurisdiction of the state and marginalizes a figure like her even more than the violently stereotyped Muslim male spectator. The denial of her right to practice her imagination along with her religion, undermines the rights guaranteed to her through citizenship.

The state's cuts by demand and decree attempt to render Rushdie's fiction as unrealistic. In the discharge of that very decree, however, the state belies the uncanny recognition that affective identifications on the part of viewers are real, important enough to warrant their suppression. In other words, these deleted scenes along with the expected affective responses, in fact, are so real they pose a potential threat. So, on the one hand, the state ostensibly censored the adaptation because it failed to live up to "reality" as the state perceives the history of the Indian nation. On the other hand, it claimed that the threat of the possible film's ability to rouse a violent response was so great that the state withheld permission for filmmakers to proceed, thereby censoring it before it was even made.

This act of censorship reveals the inability of a state, predicated on ideals of secularism and reason, to process Rushdie's assault on its concept of reality. The state's ability to instrumentalize a concept of reason to its own authoritarian ends prompts a rethinking of the efficacy of realism for critique

and a reconsideration for the productive role of affect in demonstrating the failure of reason alone to explain the threat produced by the subjunctive mode in the hoping for what might have been and by extension what might be.

Conclusion: "A long shot"

Although ultimately censored, Rushdie's proposed film challenges the linear notion of time underlying the Indian state's narrative of progress not only with a focus on simultaneity proposed by Naseem as a spectral figure but also by reworking the melodramatic convention of coincidence, a trope also predicated on non-linear understandings of temporality. The juxtaposition or mingling of private and public history, particularly the moments of coincidence of the novel Rushdie sought to adapt and to which the state objected, produces a sense of simultaneity when these melodramatic parts are compared to official state history or documentation of the events referred to in the Censor Board's deletions. The example that illustrates this best is that of Saleem and Shiva, switched babies misrecognized by the state. This scene and what follows registers a radical rethinking of the characteristics and constitution of the community of the nation. Mary Pereira, Saleem's *ayah* initially appears to be a minor character. Despite her status as a subaltern figure, however, she plays a major role in determining the course of history and becomes responsible in large part for initiating the series of melodramatic turns in the novel's narrative. Her act of nationalist and patriotic rebellion against the elite groups hated by Joseph, her erstwhile lover, takes advantage of the coincidence of the shared birth times of Saleem and Shiva. She switches the bodies of Saleem with that of his doppelganger, Shiva. At the level of the plot, this act functions as the conventional device of inserting suspense as the

reader or audience awaits Mary's disclosure of the mistaken identities. At the level of critique, however, the switching of babies renders the two bodies substitutable. Using techniques of melodramatic coincidence, Mary's irrational impulse is channeled into change: alters the fates of two individuals whose switched identities pave the path for their prospective futures, either of which might have been occupied by the other.

As members of a group of "midnight's children," they are also parts of a series: equivalent and interchangeable. The accident of their births goes unrecognized by the state, whose privileging of Shiva's Hindu identity denies Saleem, despite their equivalence, the guarantee of citizenship, which in its universality is a concept based on the quality of seriality.⁴⁴ Instead, Saleem, marginalized for his leftist political views and heir to anti-Muslim politics suffered in the denial of his father's income, inhabits a spectral citizenship as he is left narrating his story in hiding, oddly foretelling Rushdie's own fate during the *fatwa*, albeit under different constraints of contradictory secular policy. These anxieties over birth, bloodlines, and racial purity, find in melodrama a register through which to articulate a subjunctive mode or a sense of actual failure but also simultaneous suggestion of a conditional past perfect moment, a sense of how social justice and equality could have been conceptualized had the serial equality marking "midnight's children" or the multitude of the imagined community been actualized in the nation state.

Perhaps the most extended and memorable scene that constellates the idea of cinematic mediation and melodrama that deconstructs Muslim stereotypes while providing productive models of ethical secular relationality

⁴⁴ My sense of serialized citizenship emerges from Anderson's concepts of bound and unbound seriality. Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

involves Saleem spying on his mother's tryst with her erstwhile poet-lover, Nadir Khan, now Qasim Khan, present official candidate of the Communist Party. Saleem's narration of the event and the reliance on every kind of visual trope to forward the narrative begins long before we encounter the actual scene of the rendezvous. Saleem hides himself in the trunk of her car to avoid her detection as she slips away to her meeting. He orients himself in the darkness by entering his mother's consciousness to see what images organize her thinking as she maneuvers the maze of Bombay's crowded city streets:

(And, also, to discern in my mother's habitually tidy mind an alarming degree of disorder. I was already beginning, in those days, to classify people by their degree of internal tidiness, and to discover that I preferred the messier type, whose thoughts spilling constantly into one another so that anticipatory images of food interfered with the serious business of earning a living and sexual fantasies were superimposed upon their political musings, bore a closer relationship to my own pell-mell tumble of a brain, in which everything ran into everything else and the white dot of consciousness jumped about like a wild flea from one thing to the next... Amina Sinai, whose assiduous ordering-instincts had provided her with a brain of almost abnormal neatness, was a curious recruit to the ranks of confusion.) (257)

Amina's disorderly state of mind matches Saleem's, which does not change as they navigate the labyrinthine back streets adjacent to the Pioneer Café, the location of the secret meeting. When they finally arrive at the café, Saleem notices immediately its resemblance to a film set, complete with playback music blaring. Pressing his nose against the aperture of the windowpane, Saleem describes the scene as it unfolds and the cast of characters as they enter. "A repository of dreams," the café serves by day as a meeting place for industry agents to recruit extras for Bollywood blockbusters, and, later in the evening, as a haven for "a different set of dreams"—those belonging to the members of the Communist Party.

As his glance travels to a table in the back where his mother and Qasim are seated, Saleem recalls his mother's curious response to any mention of the Communist Party: "(My Uncle Hanif said, 'Watch out for the Communists!' And my mother turned scarlet; politics and emotions were united in her cheeks...)." Assembling the various parts of the love scene, Saleem realizes he is unable to look at his mother, and he cuts to a "close-up" of Qasim's cigarettes, State Express 555, only to have the frame broken into by Qasim's hands:

But now hands enter the frame—first the hands of Nadir-Qasim, their poetic softness somewhat calloused these days; hands flickering like candleflames, creeping forward across reccine, then jerking back; next a woman's hands, black as jet, inching forwards like elegant spiders; hands lifting up, off reccine tabletop, hands hovering above three fives, beginning the strangest of dances, rising, falling, circling one another, weaving in and out between each other, hands longing for touch, hands outstretching tensing quivering demanding to be—but always at last jerking back, fingertips avoiding fingertips, because that which I'm watching here on my dirty glass cinema screen is, after all an Indian movie, in which physical contact is forbidden lest it corrupt the watching flower of Indian youth; and there are feet beneath the table and faces above it, feet advancing toward feet, faces tumbling softly towards faces, but jerking away all of a sudden in a cruel censor's cut... two strangers, each baring a screen-name which is not the name of their birth, act out their half-unwanted roles. I left the movie before the end, to slip back into the boot of the unpolished unwatched Rover, wishing I hadn't gone to see it, unable to resist wanting to watch it all over again. (260)

What Saleem saw of course was the infamous "indirect kiss"—Amina kissing the glass, placing it in front of Qasim, who proceeds to kiss the other side of the glass: "life imitated bad art." Saleem recalls the scene's precedent in his Uncle Hanif's film *The Lovers of Kashmir*. Yet again Saleem experiences, "Melodrama piling upon melodrama: life acquiring the coloring of a Bombay talkie."

Saleem enters his mother's head to understand her thought process as she embarks on her adulterous adventure and notices the mixing of the tidy and untidy, orderly and disorderly, rational and irrational. The novel suggests that our effort to distinguish between these binaries is a self-conscious move, one that can have strategic motivations, for example in the effort to solve a problem or in the case of the state's censorship of the screenplay based on the novel. The dichotomy need not be separated, however, for the mere sake of holding them apart. Such a separation is obviously the foundation of what we think of as modernity—a separation of reason and unreason, but is not necessarily true to one's experience or the experience of subjectivity, as is demonstrated by the blending of two in the thought processes of Amina and Saleem. Such a separation is also the very same foundation upon which the state's censorship of Rushdie's film lies along with its demand for the unitary and uniform subject whose faculties can necessarily be instrumentalized to its own ends.

Moreover, in addition to the representation of multiple realities—the events and *mise-en-scène* of the meeting, Saleem's act of witnessing and interpreting the meeting, the reader's experience with the two—Rushdie relies on the cinematic to demonstrate how simultaneity constitutes reality. Secondly, in the scene, the tableau as well as the gestures of the two actors, and Saleem's responses to them, recall some of the key elements of iconic framing and melodrama described by Vasudevan and Brooks.⁴⁵ Saleem's narration composes the shot so that the actors in the scene as well as the tableau appear to be represented as if on the “verge on stasis,” in the manner

⁴⁵ See the previous chapter for Vasudevan and Thomas's arguments on iconic framing and stasis as markers of early aesthetic tradition interrupting modern conventions such as continuity editing.

of 1950s Hindi films. There is in fact limited movement and “potential disturbance and reorganization” available from outside the frame such that an aesthetic experience of the scene that calls for an immersion of the reader and narrator in the image is called for, if not demanded. It is not surprising that Saleem relates to Amina inter-subjectively. The composition of the shot he perceives elicits such a corporeal response, its intended use.

Lest the evocation of the pre-modern through the mention of the aesthetics of iconic framing in this argument seem anachronistic, however, I stress that the scene is after all framed according to the terms of a modern technological form: cinema. This scene enacts a representation of the construction of the haunted modern, albeit an alternative and hybrid modernity in its reliance on old and new aesthetic systems. The scene’s construction of modernity is all that much more striking, however, because while it seems to resolve the tensions of moral disorder in relation to representations of kissing and the policy of censorship in Bollywood films (the scene suggests that they want to kiss, but in fact they do not) within the given parameter of sanctioned Hindi film codes, the crucial modern re-interpretation of the pre-modern form is even more surprising when we note that in fact the transgression is much more serious than the desire or attempt to meet secretly as plots of the 1950s films suggest.⁴⁶ Rather, it is an attempt to meet and kiss in a private *adulterous* context, the representation of which was outlawed in the paradigm of Hindi films of that time and considered more of a taboo than the act of kissing.

⁴⁶ Madhava Prasad, “Cinema and the Desire for Modernity,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25–26, (1993) 71–86.

The novel then turns its focus to Saleem, the spectator of the scene, who, in a reference to one of the most common tropes of melodrama, is switched at birth, rendering him Muslim in name, but not by birth. In the excess of the scene, Saleem's desire for his mother is revealed, and, though angry and betrayed by Qasim's presence and his mother's affair, he does not succumb to violence. This is not the censoring state's assumed spectator, whose affective reactions to a potentially objectionable scene are necessarily translated into acts of violence. On the contrary, Saleem's refusal to stay through the scene and witness the seduction of his mother in its entirety offers a model of the subject who chooses how his affective response will be structured and refuses this instrumentalization of his faculties. The realization that viewing a scene produces a sense of self, and that choosing not to view might produce another, reveals affect as a structuring principle in the act of producing subjectivity through collective understanding.

Contrast then these representations of the constructions of subjectivity in Rushdie with the ones circumscribed by the state's act of censoring the adaptation of the novel. Amina, as seen through the frame of Saleem's imaginary camera, juxtaposed with Naseem, his grandmother, framed by the demure hole of the white sheet prior to her wedding night, is by no means the Muslim female subject relegated to bearer of tradition by state and personal laws to which she is subject. She is, in fact, the subject of an illicit love affair, which very much forms the basis of and enables the work of the Communist party through her support of Qasim Nadir.

The state, with its act of censorship, endeavors to halt the representation of this sort of autonomy, not to protect women's virtue. The state's mandate to cut these scenes on the grounds that violence might erupt

but to sanction, if not endorse and legitimize, gendered and sexualized violence against women in the planned pogrom against Muslims in Godhra, belies its contradictory secular policy and its instrumentalist orientation. The cinematic representation of this scene of melodramatic intimacy arousing Saleem's affective response suggests filmic adaptation's potential for representing difference, the magic of which the state attempts to contain. It is this state of "politics and emotions" being united in Rushdie's proposed cinematic text that allows the state to celebrate *Midnight's Children*, the novel, while simultaneously censoring as a threat its filmic adaptation with a series of "Deletes."

CHAPTER 5
THE DEATH OF THE SECULAR IN
MANIL SURI'S *THE DEATH OF VISHNU*

According to author Suketu Mehta, the partition of the subcontinent and the subsequent death of secularism in South Asia have left individuals of different religions and castes the legacy of fatal love, whereby desire for the other or the transgression of the boundaries of one's own community may result in death. He writes: "We, the peoples of the Subcontinent, respect illicit love; we know that the most powerful love is the hidden love, the secret longing of the individual soul for an absent god." Using Mehta's formulation of fatality as a starting point, along with Manil Suri's *Death of Vishnu* (2001), a novel whose language deploys cinematic strategies and conventions, this chapter examines how cinephilia and cinema produce a model of subaltern subjectivity that might counter the death or failure of Indian secularism.¹

Set in the 1980s in a middle-class neighborhood of Bombay, the novel begins with Vishnu, a sick and low-caste handyman languishing in a building stairwell. Vishnu lies in his own waste and vomit as his tenant employers step over his body on the way in and out of the building. Although they profess to cultivate a rational secular and tolerant sensibility, they nonetheless refuse to mobilize their reason and understanding to dispose of his body. Complaining that the putrid stench emanating from his body is intolerable, the tenants remain indifferent as to whether he actually is alive or dead.

¹ Manil Suri, *The Death of Vishnu* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). All subsequent references are to this edition with page numbers included in parentheses in the text.

Meanwhile, Vishnu, though weak and listless, remains aware of his surroundings and imagines himself as the star of a melodramatic and devotional film depicting actual and fantastical events of his life. Eventually, the novel suggests that Vishnu becomes a ghost with supernatural powers, and leaving the building stairwell, travels through urban spaces of Bombay visiting monuments such as the Gateway of India, and other public sites where he would otherwise be denied entry. Although critics and scholars have characterized the narrative as magical realism, as they do with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, I argue that the role of cinematic mediation rather than magic accounts for Suri's less naturalistic representations.

I argue that it is only through his cinephiliac identifications and mobilization of affective responses to Indian devotional and melodramatic films that Vishnu is able to recast his future from one of failure to one of potential or "failure," thereby granting him a dignity denied him by his caste position. More importantly, his cinematic experience offers him an ethical understanding of communal relationality that shows up the limits of the state's secular realist register and perhaps the logic underlying realism as well. Against the charge of some critics that Suri's novel recycles kitsch melodramatic conventions, I argue that he uses melodrama as an aesthetics of "failure," which signifies in a double move the failure of rational and realist accounts of secularism to represent difference while acknowledging the possibility for ethical understanding initiated by cinematic and other affect.

As discussed earlier, India produces the largest number of feature films in the world, about 800 to 1,000 yearly, accounting for cinephiliac responses on a large scale and distinct in quality from cinephilia as it is conventionally understood. My focus in this chapter, however, is on the cinephilia

engendered by devotional films, which are understood in their own generic terms but are characterized by melodrama as well. Devotional films typically feature fantastically rendered narratives of deities and saints often in bright and saturated color with a reliance on low budget special effects. These have recently played a special role in the constitution of public culture, particularly before television was widely available. Vijay Sharma's 1975 low-budget hit *Jai Santoshi Maa* (*Hail To Mother Santoshi*) was perhaps the most well-known and productive of new forms of popular religiosity. I argue that this film, combined with Suri's cinephiliac identification with it, serves as the inter-text for his novel. Indeed Suri himself speaks of the effect on him of film in general and this film in particular:

Movies were everything. I see them as something that really ties together the whole of society, whether you are rich or poor or whatever, that's a common frame of reference. Everyone sees movies and knows about them. And so in terms of how they interact with religion... there are all these movies about religious characters. There was one movie called *Jai Santoshi Ma* some years back I guess about twenty years ago or thirty years ago and that was about this little-known goddess, I guess she was an incarnation of either Lakshmi or Durga. But after that suddenly people discovered this goddess, and suddenly overnight there were thousands of temples to Santoshi Ma all over the country and to this day people perform fasts in her honor which they wouldn't twenty years ago because no one knew who Santoshi Ma was. So they're really powerful... I think when you're talking about India, and talking about social life and so on there, I think that's really one of the key issues, one of the things that lies at the heart of society there.²

A related factor ensuring the success of these devotional films is the role of melodrama, a mode whose privileging of excess through rhetoric and spectacle are particularly suited to the re-telling of folk tales, myths, and the

² As cited in Manil Suri and Michael Cunningham, "*The Death of Vishnu* (a conversation)," *Manil Suri* (no date; accessed 12 December 2005), <<http://www.manilsuri.com/suri-vishnu-qa.htm>>.

epic texts of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The moralistic overtones of these narratives characterize these devotional films.

While the previous chapter examined how the contradiction of Indian secularism is resolved through Hinduism serving as the majority religion and *shariah*, or personal laws, allegedly offering protections for Muslim minorities. This chapter draws on the corollary point, namely that for low caste and tribal communities, the quota system or issue of reservations dominates definitions of the secular. This ideology attributes to the violence which Suketu Mehta remind us of and which attests to the failures of secularism.³

As a result, the subaltern subject is erased from the state account of the nation. I argue that it is cinephilia that affords the spectator a moment of self-definition; for example, at the novel's conclusion, having shown Vishnu's failure even to die properly and upon his return as a ghost, acts that defy reason, ironically offer him the possibility to live a life historically denied him. While the instance of cinephilia might not necessarily directly advance the production of secular *policy*, the possibility for individual pleasure to engage one's imaginative practice is not to be taken lightly in as much as it offers a space for subaltern subjectivity.

Potentials of "failure"

The Death of Vishnu contests the Indian state's Hindu nationalist triumphalism by staging "failure" as a redemptive tactic, particularly in its use of melodrama as failed realism. The triumphalist projection of Hindu nationalist future, winning back the nation's former glory by claiming hegemony over

³ This analysis has consequences not only for the postcolonial context but in the European as well whose colonial projects undermined the ideals of Enlightenment reason, the premise of secular ideology.

“outsiders” and reclaiming “stolen” land, permits the state to privilege elite Hindus while marginalizing Muslim minorities and Dalits or members of low castes. Such a fantasy denies the serial aspect of citizenship.⁴ It allows the state to refuse and ignore economic and social differences already in place and exacerbated by the globalization of Hindutva.

Rather than claim victim status in response to the triumphalism of the majority, the subaltern figure represented by Vishnu, a low-caste servant marginalized as a result of the contradictions inherent to Indian secularism, redeploys “failure” as response, habit, and practice to alter the social terms that signify under the name of secular, such as aggression and enmity. The 1980s saw the emergence of a more virulent version of Hindutva, particularly in Bombay.⁵ The latent ideology apparent in early anti-colonial and nationalist Maharashtran movements of Tilak and Savarkar were refashioned into propaganda for local paramilitary groups with an eye to annexing contested sites of equal importance for Hindus and Muslims. This movement transformed the benevolent and heroic representation of the deity Ram, the vanquisher of evil, into an expressly masculinist, violent, and martial figure, the icon now invoked by Hindu nationalists. The object of Ram’s fury was Raavana, the demon other who had dared to trespass and kidnap his wife, Sita, in the epic *Ramayana*, was replaced by the figure of the Muslim, now recast as invader and other.

⁴ Hindu extremists claim generations of Muslim rule starting with the Mughal empire have been responsible for claiming land considered sacred to Hindus. The most important sites are currently the Kashi Viswanath Temple in Banaras and of course the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, demolished in 1992.

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, “Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai,” *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000): 637. See also Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, Uday Singh Mehta, and Usha Thakkar, “The Rebirth of Shiv Sena: The Symbiosis of Discursive and Organizational Power” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 562 (spring 1997): 371–390.

In contrast to this martial figure, Vishnu, the lowly and “failed” servant, by embodying the film icon of his favorite devotional films, inserts himself into the role of Vishnu, the Hindu deity, thereby equating his own worth with that of a divine figure. The practice of impersonation wherein Vishnu embodies the image on the screen serves as an analog to the trope of coincidence that demonstrated the inter-changeability of Saleem and Shiva, or Muslim and Hindu, in the previous chapter’s discussion of *Midnight’s Children*. Similarly, Vishnu performs the interchangeability between himself and the god for which he has been named. Using his “failed” state to re-imagine the narrative of his life as he hoped it would be, Vishnu, challenges the boundaries of caste hierarchies that continue to be held in place by the state’s official policy on secularism. He prompts individuals around him to re-consider their mistreatment of subaltern figures like himself and thereby shows the failures and limits of secular relations that undermine this concept of equality.

These failures include the corruption of the failed state and its contradictory secular policy, which undermines the tolerance of minority communities. The realist rhetoric of state sovereignty and secular policy also fails to account for spectral citizenship produced by modern bureaucracies and institutions of governmentality. The novel thematizes the limits of realist discourse with a focus on that which is elided in mainstream and state sponsored news media, in the state’s techniques of documenting and quantifying populations through the census and municipal governance, and ideologically, through the cosmopolitan secular rhetoric espoused by the various characters.

Vishnu's "failures," however, are not contained within the walls of the stairwell, where he lays dying, ignored separately by Hindu *and* Muslim tenants. His failures serve potentially to reconfigure relations amongst these families from different communities, and between tenants and low-caste servants, revealing the failures of secular policy to maintain social justice and protect difference, not only across religious difference but also along caste lines. In both of these realms, that of state and civil society, religion is understood to exist outside of the realm of the public, so that religious practice remains private and divorced from social and ethical questions of community, belonging, and relationality. While minorities continue to be marginalized by the state's contradictory policy of secularism, the assertion of the official position on secularism is afforded protection by virtue of the state's realist rhetoric.

Contrary to this contradictory policy, melodrama serves to destabilize the realistic register of state discourse. Composed of three parts, the rest of the chapter examines the novel's uses of melodrama, argues for the mode as a privileged mode of narration for subalterneity, and shows the limits of realism for representing a subaltern figure such as Vishnu. If we accept this formulation (i.e., the erasure of the subaltern is a problem), Indian melodrama's roots in the mythological cinematic form and relation to the devotional, two forms which originally sought to offer subaltern groups popular modes of anti-colonial expression through a deployment of accessible religious icons and historical figures, offer some openings to consider what sorts of imaginative practices produced or provoked change.⁶ In *The Death of*

⁶ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14–15 (July–December 1987): 47–78.

Vishnu, I argue that the character of Vishnu is represented as redeploying the iconography of these mythological and devotional forms to re-inflect his “failure” as potential for the future rather than failure as abjection emerging from a low-caste status, a condition pre-determined by the past.

The next section raises the question of how postcolonial spectrality becomes productive of subjectivity. I argue that the representation of Vishnu as a ghost marks the spectral quality that characterizes subaltern citizenship, a condition produced by the state’s denial of rights. To be sure, these rights are due them as citizens and members of a laboring social body. Their low-caste or Dalit status and the influence of Hindutva on the determination of secular policy in India nonetheless render their citizenship spectral; they are reduced to specters in death, that is, much the same way as the state perceived them in life.

The possibility of imagining such a spectral existence is made possible, I argue, through a process of cinematic mediation whereby the logic of making meaning or perceiving a filmic image, an image that I describe as specular, is the very same as that of perceiving a ghost. The figure of a ghost serves as a trope for the film image’s haunting quality which has unforeseen consequences as a result of its existence in the realm of fantasy and the unconscious. In both cases, it is the affective response to a film image and ghost that keep them alive in the spectator’s mind’s eye. Like the ghost, the power of the image prevails through the process of haunting the mind of the spectator through memory, projection, and fantasy.

Lastly, I consider how this process of melodramatic cinematic mediation interpolates Vishnu as a ghost, so that he projects his “failed” existence into film narratives. Though marginalized in life, Vishnu’s assumes

iconic status in his self-representation; he adapts the story of his life through a process of specular mimesis, or the repeated performance of assuming the roles that allow him to perform an alternative subjectivity, alternatively, as a roguish hero in Bollywood romances and as Vishnu, the beneficent Hindu deity in devotional films. Casting himself as a star in these roles, he mobilizes his own cinephilia in the form of affective responses to his life and death, thereby producing an alternative to the oppressed subaltern subject position he has been forced to assume. The novel's historical narrative is interrupted with fantastical accounts of Vishu's spectrality as apparition, mediated in a cinematic mode in the manner of popular Hindi films.⁷ The novel subverts the escapist quality ascribed to melodrama, understood as a failed form, particularly in the forms of fantasy and interruption, to produce a more critical aesthetics of "failure." At the same time, realism and melodrama are seen to be mutually constitutive. What was formerly considered a failure of realist aesthetics is reworked to produce representations of alternative subaltern practices of the imagination. Not only does the character Vishnu re-imagine his life through the cinematic frame of film, the novel organizes its own narrative in a similar filmic structure.

In summary, I argue that the categories secular and rational are inadequate to explore the ethical questions underlying ideas of difference and relationality, the concepts upon which democratic secularism is based and safeguards, particularly as it is currently represented in the realist prose of bureaucratic governmentality. In this instance, the municipality responsible for Vishnu's body represents the secularism of the state in the event that no

⁷ These moments differ from well-known narratives in the genre of magical realism because of their cinematic mediation.

religious ceremony has been privately organized. The secular attitudes of civil society, represented by the tenants' failure to act in saving Vishnu's life or giving him a dignified death, both fail. It is affective and seemingly irrational understanding, precipitated by melodrama, which suggest an ethical solution through Vishnu's example of relating to others and claiming a subject position.

The novel and its context

Set in the 1980s in a middle-class neighborhood of Bombay, the novel introduces a day in the life of Vishnu, the main narrator of the novel, stooped over in the stairwell of the middle-class building where he worked and lived. He lays dying while watching episodes of a film entitled *The Death of Vishnu*, starring himself as the lead on screen.⁸ The story of his life as a poor servant cuts between fantastic film flashbacks drawing on myths, folktales, and everyday urban life. By imagining himself as the deity, the servant Vishnu imagines himself inhabiting myths and folktales, which were the subject of popular devotional films of his day and the favorite topic of his mother's stories.

The fantastic narratives contrast with the more realistically rendered stories of his life as the hero of a Bollywood romance. As the lead in a Bollywood melodrama, he re-imagines his unrequited romance with his lover Padmini, a prostitute with whom he spends his little leisure time. Although the romance fails even in his re-imagined version, his adaptation considers elements of events as potentials of unknown or unforeseen possibility that

⁸ The novel does not explicitly specify the period of its setting as the 1970s or 1980s but the characters reference films from their youth such as *Main Chup Rahoongi* (1962), starring Meena Kumari, a star whom one of the characters emulates.

could have transpired rather than as failures once and for all. This act redeems the relationship, so that it draws strength from the act of imagining alternatives and offers him a basis for critiquing his condition as a subaltern denied a private life.

Depicting himself in these central roles as a Bollywood lead and then in the devotional tales, as Vishnu the deity, he engages in a practice of imagination and production of public culture, the participation and making of which are often off-limits to members of the low castes. They are restricted or shunned from many religious and public spaces. Through Vishnu's imagination of himself as a deity, however, Vishnu domesticates those spaces from the ideological grip of high-caste Hindu control. By using the very same signs of Hindu iconography to stage his own equality or substitubility for a sacred figure, Vishnu, the servant demonstrates the possibility for belonging and citizenship predicated on seriality but rendered through an idiom of incommensurability; that is, the linguistic medium of the novel stretches to accommodate the representation of Vishnu's embodied transformation.

Although such moments are often understood simply as magical realism, a very broad category encompassing the literature of multiple continents, I argue for a need to contextualize these seemingly fantastical moments within cinematic spectatorship, cinephilia, and visual culture in India. We might see language reaching and perhaps surpassing its boundaries as representations make room for integrating modes of understanding not solely predicated on reason and rationality. *The Death of Vishnu* thwarts this understanding, however. Instead the novel suggests a model of affective inter-subjectivity, rather than identification alone as an understanding of the process of mimesis. Finally, we see language inflected

by the origins of some of the aesthetic frameworks constituting public culture, for example, in *rasa* theory or in the popular idiom of Bollywood language, an element that characterizes “low” art but “high” art as well. The inclusion of visual culture in a discussion of a novel has implications for its reach or accessibility in terms of reception and circulation.⁹

Vishnu’s eventual demise goes against the conventions of Bollywood melodramatic film and does not offer him the success promised by their generically happy endings. His internalization of the logic of Indian devotional films, however, leads him to relate to others in a form of radical inter-subjectivity across lines of religious and social difference, indeed across all lines of self and other. His lost opportunity affords him knowledge of relationality across axes of difference, the representation of which serves to critique the absence of ethical terms in the determination of secular policy responsible for guaranteeing Indian citizens equality under state law.

The absence of this concept of equality is represented in the indifference exhibited by mostly high-caste Hindus inhabiting the building. Though the building’s tenants cite the rational secular discourse of Nehru or stereotyped mystical traditions of Hindu and Muslim unity, they refuse to overlook his low-caste status and mobilize their rational understanding of these discourses to have his corpse cremated. By contrast, Vishnu generates an understanding of ethical relations through his affective response. In dying he returns as a ghost, and assumes the role of Vishnu, the deity through identification and specular mimesis predicated on cinephilia. His absorption of and into icons of devotional films initiate affective and embodied

⁹ Sumanta Bannerjee, *The Parlour and the Street: Elite and Popular Culture in 19th-Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: South Asia Books, 1990).

knowledge of ethical relations, which bring together individuals across difference who are then brought together in arrangements of ethical understanding. The spectral quality of existing simultaneously in states of life and death, in presence through absence, as himself through another spectral self, dissolves the dichotomous relationship between subject and object. His liminal position instigates a proximity that affords him affective, if not somatic, understanding of the pain resulting from marginalization for another besides himself. In contrast, this acknowledgment of the consequences of social, economic, ethnic, and religious difference, which is the absent referent in the discourse underlying Indian secular policy, fails to mobilize the tenants to safeguard Vishnu's well-being, forcing him into abjection.

Disavowal of reality for realism

The Death of Vishnu is the first in a trilogy, recently followed by *The Age of Shiva* and the forthcoming *The Birth of Brahma*.¹⁰ The form of the trilogy plays upon the tri-partite structure of the *trimurti*, or trinity of Hinduism representing the three deities who constitute it: Vishnu, the preserver; Shiva, the destroyer; and Brahma, the creator, according to the novel's author, Manil Suri.¹¹ Although Suri is a mathematician by profession and claims to have come to writing later in his life, his fiction has drawn much attention and acclaim. Long-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize in 2001, and winner of the McKitterick Prize for 2002, *The Death of Vishnu* received critical attention in the popular press.¹² Suri intends to expand upon the theme of relating the

¹⁰ Manil Suri, *The Age of Shiva: A Novel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

¹¹ Manil Suri and Michael Cunningham, "The Death of Vishnu (a conversation)," *Manil Suri* (no date; accessed 12 December 2005), <<http://www.manilsuri.com/suri-vishnu-qa.htm>>.

¹² Moreover, Suri's novel was much anticipated and advertised even before it appeared as evinced by the media reports of the monetary advances it secured. Eleven publishing houses fought for the U.S. rights for the novel in a heated auction, which earned the novel \$350,000

mythical to the mundane by juxtaposing mythology with stories of myths of “flesh and blood” characters as he does in *The Death of Vishnu*.¹³ The novel has also inspired a film adaptation.¹⁴

Despite Suri’s favorable reception by mainstream media, the following review of various critical responses demonstrates the dismissal of the melodramatic and popular modes even as these aspects define the novel’s success. The demand for realist aesthetics enacts and enables a double silencing as the critic of melodrama endorses a version of the realism of the state that writes the subaltern out of time and out of history. According to these critics, Suri falls short of being a great chronicler of his times because of the novel’s failed attempt at realism. Suri has in fact been compared to Rushdie and many postcolonial writers, such as Rohinton Mistry and Vikram Chandra, because of their shared interests in depicting postcolonial everyday life in present-day postcolonial Bombay.¹⁵ Although the critics consistently laud his balance of levity and gravity, evinced by humorous interludes contrasting mythical references, they critique those popular references to the excess of Bollywood filmic melodrama and irrational elements such as

before it was published, and propelled it into the market where rights were sold in thirteen countries. Andrea Sachs, “People To Watch: Manil Suri,” *Time* (4 September 2000; accessed 25 November 2006), < <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,997861,00.html>>.

¹³ As cited in Manil Suri and Michael Cunningham, “*The Death of Vishnu* (a conversation),” *Manil Suri* (no date; accessed 12 December 2005), <<http://www.manilsuri.com/suri-vishnu-qa.htm>>.

¹⁴ Dhawan is a young and promising writer and filmmaker, who is responsible for the screenplay used for *Monsoon Wedding*, Mira Nair’s 2001 cross-over diasporic hit film, and the more experimental *11’09’01–September 11*, an omnibus of short films by acclaimed filmmakers, each of whom contributed a piece that was eleven minutes and nine seconds long. She also produced her own film, *Saanjh* or *When Night Falls* (2000), whose themes resonate with Suri’s. The film’s plot consists a poor young mother of twins, one of whom dies on a train journey, which is the setting for the film. The passengers of the train, callous to the trauma she undergoes, coerce her to dispose of the corpse of the child, raising the question of how marginalized bodies are prevented from inhabiting the social body of the nation. Arthur J. Pais and Vivek Fernandes, “I Borrowed Big-Time from Life,” *Rediff: India Abroad* (1 December 2001; accessed 25 November 2006), <www.rediff.com/entertai/2001/dec/01sab.htm>.

¹⁵ Indeed, Suri studied writing with Vikram Chandra.

spectrality or haunting. By contrast, I argue that these features in fact offer us a social critique, one of realism's intended aims.

Most reviews of the novel that I found disparage his references to the popular visual culture of Bollywood melodrama, which they perceive as kitsch or a failure of Suri's otherwise realist goals. What is paradoxical, however, in the critics' observations and desires for more realist accounts of the everyday is that they value precisely those elements that *stereotypically* stand in for Indian culture: myth, religion, and timelessness. In other words, they define as real, stereotypically unchanging Eastern spirituality and religious sensibility, thereby essentializing the diversity that characterizes the nation. This preference and concomitant disavowal of the popular present recalls Orientalizing stereotypes of a diverse people conflated into a narrow understanding of India as an ancient civilization, perceived as overly mystical, too easily characterized as irrational and other. The details constituting the present, moreover, if not characterized as kitsch are disavowed for being overly nostalgic and inauthentic, the markers of Suri's own expatriate and "outsider" status.

Contrary to these reviews of Suri's work, I argue that what these critics laud as timeless and appreciate as mythical tradition is historical, and in fact *invented* in the service of Hindu nationalist interests, a point which critics overlook in their disavowal of the importance of the melodramatic. The critics' focus on Hindu mythical elements as representative of India overlooks the fact that such an emphasis champions precisely the sort of high Brahmanical tradition and ideology Suri *critiques*. This characterization of India in neo-Orientalist terms not only produces a limited and stereotypical representation, it obfuscates the potential Suri seems to explore in popular

culture at the expense of elevating high culture, the implicit aim of Suri's critique.¹⁶

In fact, the bustling urban metropole of Bombay is surprisingly likened to the fictional unspoiled and serene setting of Malgudi, made famous by one of India's most well known writers in the west, R. K. Narayan. Unlike his other postcolonial contemporaries, argues Michael Gorra, Suri evokes Narayan's "deliberately modest" fiction situated in the seemingly timeless locale of Malgudi, removed from the historical forces that seem to shape the rest of the nation and much loved by faithful readers of Narayan's fiction.¹⁷

He writes:

The pressures of colonialism and its aftermath, of Partition, war, and sectarian violence, the natural disasters of flood, famine, and disease—none of these seem to touch Malgudi in any permanent way. For Narayan, such events matter only insofar as they can be pushed aside; they are manifestations of an illusory present replaced by a deodorized idyll of an ever-unchanging land.¹⁸

Gorra goes on to argue that, like Narayan, Suri depicts a version of Bombay that is also comparably unchanging and devoid of the imprint of the grinding machinery of global change and the brutal violence of communal conflict.

¹⁶ His methods are politely described as exceptional or unconventional to account for moments of melodrama, perceived as excessive—an indication of the failure of an attempt at realism. Other postcolonial writers, who seem to be characterized by a certain "cosmopolitan extravagance," such as Rushdie, or as "chroniclers of diaspora and its discontents," such as Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, seem to form a particular grouping from which Suri stands apart.

¹⁷ Malgudi is the setting for his series of novels including *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, and *The Painter of Signs*. R.K. Narayan trafficked between film and fiction despite the characterization of him as a purely literary writer by Gorra. His serial fiction inspired the television serial *Malgudi Days* and his novel *The Guide* was adapted into a Hindi film of the same title by Vijay Anand in 1965. He wrote the screenplay for the film *Miss Malini*, which in turn produced the main character for his novel, *Mr. Sampath*. He was also responsible for the film treatment for R. Nagendra Rao's *Moondru Pillaigal*, a 1952 Tamil film. R. K. Ramachandran and Randor Guy, "A Flood of Fond Memories," *The Hindu* online edition (26 July 2001; accessed 25 November 2006), <www.hinduonnet.com/2001/07/26/stories/13261282.htm>.

¹⁸ Michael Gorra, "The God on the Landing," *The New York Times* online edition (28 January 2001; accessed 25 November 2006), <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/01/28/reviews/010128.28gorrat.html>>.

Gorra reduces Suri's description of the fast growing context of Bombay in the 1980s to Narayan's sleepy town of Malgudi in the 1950s. The disavowal of popular religiosity in the real-life demise of individuals represented by Vishnu, moreover, obscures the overlap between the popular and the public as they constitute Indian secularism and renders the popular as detached and depoliticized.¹⁹

Comparing the "descriptions of mystical rapture" supposedly experienced by Vishnu to the "effulgent white light" in Parahamahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and "the ecstasy of Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*," Elizabeth Kadetsky also suggests that the spiritual aspects of the novel render the representations of the city and its inhabitants timeless and unchanging, indeed quite in keeping with Orientalist depictions. In other words, the historical conditions or forces of decolonization that have played a huge part in producing the popular that constitutes everyday life in India are not included in her description of what constitutes the modern for Suri.

In contrast to Gorra, however, she suggests that modern references appear in the novel but only as superficial popular culture. So, for example, Kadetsky emphasizes the brassy and vulgar references that seem to anchor the novel in the contemporary or modern period. The embedding of those low culture references into the more substantive and profound "mythic" narrative structure, however, is what comes to stand for the real India, that is as authentic and essential. The overshadowing of the popular by the mythic redeems what would otherwise be actual aesthetic failures of the text. For

¹⁹ Suri notes that the character of Vishnu is in fact based on a servant who worked in the building where Suri resided in Bombay. As cited in Suri and Cunningham.

example, Kadetsky also disavows the importance of melodramatic “soap opera-like tableaux” and “Bollywood-like triteness,” thereby refusing the significance of the popular in the construction of the everyday and eliding that which might be considered political in the Indian context, namely the popular as public culture.

While the review of noted author Pankaj Mishra offers a more contextualized reading, Mishra also suffers the melodramatic elements arguing that, though historicized, melodramatic elements actually substitute for the nostalgia of the novel’s author. Mishra’s review at least concedes the context of the novel to be modern rather than mythical.²⁰ For example, citing the decay of Bombay as standing in for the process of change in India at large, Mishra notes that the events of the narrative very much represent urban modernity, albeit a “borrowed modernity,” which unsettles its inhabitants. The characters’ experiences with this borrowed modernity shape the events and circumstances that color their lives, particularly in economic and social terms. In this way, the urban Indian modern condition exists in a time that has broken in many significant ways with the past. The transition results in the failures of relations between diverse groups. For Mishra, these external factors—the spread of rampant consumerism in the middle class, the desire for American goods, the escapist fantasy life inspired by exposure to these images and products—play an ancillary role in forming the narrative. Characterizations form the major strength of the novel, save for Vishnu: his development as a deity and its exaggeration of events impedes the reader’s interest in him from growing. For Mishra, Suri’s unrealistic depiction of

²⁰ Pankaj Mishra, “Dreaming of Mangoes,” *The New York Review of Books* 48.9 (31 May 2001). Mishra is the author of the novel *The Romantics* and most recently *India in Mind* (2005) and *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* (2005). Mishra writes often about Indian literature and contemporary culture politics in India.

Vishnu's falters and ultimately fails in comparison to realist depictions of the characters' lives, pushing the novel over the brink of believability.

More importantly, Mishra seems to imply that Vishnu's rendering as a thoughtful and forlorn individual pining for the distant past of his childhood and hankering for an impossible future imagined through the medium of Bollywood cinema, falls short of believability because Vishnu's nostalgia and loss stands in for Suri's own expatriate experiences of the same. Of Vishnu's musings on movies and mangoes, Mishra writes:

The pre-fab daydreams Suri burdens him with toward the end of the novel may seem like Vishnu's way of escaping the desolation of both his life and death. As it turns out, it is Suri who manages to avoid a clear-eyed reckoning with Vishnu's fate... And Vishnu's dreams of Hindi films and mangoes—"Mangoes. So full, so sweet, so scented, the oranges and yellows of sunlight. So this is the food gods get offered, Vishnu thinks. Ah, mangoes"—seem to come straight out of Suri's own expatriate's nostalgia for India.²¹

In contrast to Suri's Vishnu, seemingly a displacement of Suri's own diasporic desires, Mishra notes that Vikram Chandra, a writer who splits his time between the academy in the United States and writing fiction, which chronicles the lives of those who inhabit the underbelly of Bombay, offers portraits of lives which demonstrate "an intimacy, which results in a refusal to judge, and a wish to find grace and skill and emotion in what others might see as the shabbiness and brutality of Bombay."²² The depiction of Chandra as an

²¹ Appadurai, "Spectral Housing," 627–651. Appadurai recalls how changing economic conditions brought on by globalization saw the export of many products from Bombay, causing a shortage and price increase noticed by its citizens. He cites a shortage of Alphonso mangoes, the citizens' "favorite summer fruit," which became difficult to obtain for the middle classes, let alone the poor. Suri, at least in this depiction of memory, seems to have researched the period well enough to stave off a criticism of expatriate nostalgia.

²² Suri in fact studied writing with Vikram Chandra, who teaches Creative Writing at George Washington University. Chandra wrote with Suketu Mehta, author of *Maximum Bombay*, the screenplay for *Mission Kashmir*, a popular Vidhu Vinod Chopra film, released in 2000. Chandra goes on to argue that his characterization "actually expresses an uncynical acceptance of Bombay as a whole world in itself, so self-contained that it neither desires nor is

insider, while Suri, deemed an expatriate, sets up an opposition of inside and outside, belonging and alienation, organic and artificial, and most importantly, realism and fantasy, where the first quality of each opposition is valued and privileged.²³

We see here that in Mishra's critique of fantastical elements in the description of the death of Vishnu and in his comparison of Suri and Chandra belies a demand for a realism subsequently conflated with a sense of authenticity, i.e., that which is "at home," or implies an intimacy with the object it supposedly brings to life. Mishra implicitly argues that realism does in fact correspond to truth, which is all that much more clear or available to an insider with authentic epistemic privilege or insider knowledge. Such a demand belies Mishra's own grafting of his understanding of what constitutes national belonging and who authentically speaks for national histories or presents. The move away from such a realist register, indicated by Suri's lack of transparency in the language of narration, in this case by the language of melodrama, marks him as removed from his object of study. For Mishra, this failure of representation is an indication of a loss of authenticity for the writer, and marks a failure of belonging.

in need of external assessment; it speaks of the confidence of the metropolitan writer, fully at home in his city, and perennially alert to its zestful possibilities."

²³ Mishra's schematization of Chandra as metropolitan, at home in Bombay, while Suri, as expatriate, homeless (like Vishnu) in Bombay, raises thorny questions of authenticity and belonging vis-à-vis national identity. Mishra lumps Suri, but not Chandra, in with diasporic writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, and Akhil Sharma. What sorts of spectral nationalisms are at work in these moves of claiming for Bombay and the Indian nation state, Chandra who is seemingly "at home," in contrast to these writers who are rendered metaphorically homeless in comparison when all of them reside and circulate in the structures of the North American academy and publishing industry? Mishra's categorization of these postcolonial writers also brings to light the erasure of another identity when a writer is called expatriate, namely his status as an Asian American writer, both in the contexts of Suri, and Lahiri, Mistry and Sharma.

His reading of Suri's failure or the mode of failed realism in the novel, which Gorra and Kadetsky share, nonetheless acknowledges, albeit negatively, the significance of the popular and the political. Rather than read this failure of realism as an indication of a failure of epistemic privilege or understanding as the three authors put forward, I argue for a need to see the relationship between the popular, the political, and their roles in the construction of the language of the novel, a reading that productively puts pressure on the role of "failed" realism; i.e., the idiom by which Suri conveys the "failure" of states offers us a way of understanding the relationship between the national and under the rubric of insider/outsider, which after all is the rubric the state seeks to forward in its suppression of minorities. While Mishra persuasively and forcefully writes against these actions of the Indian state in other places, nonetheless, the binarism of inclusion and exclusion that structures his argument here underlies his demand for realism and does not sufficiently de-stabilize the analogous logic underlying the ideology adopted by the state.

Mishra's focus on the political and historical contexts of Suri's novel, however, prompted me to examine more closely the role of melodrama in undoing the binaries that allow critics such as Gorra, Kadetsky, and Mishra to judge and dismiss Suri's fictions as unrealistic while privileging and conflating realism and Indian identity. To that end, I consider various characteristics of melodrama that address the sort of binaristic logic that ties together realism, politics of authenticity, and belonging.

Cinephiles and specters

In the following section, I offer an historical consideration of spectrality mediated by cinema as an important trope for understanding urban subaltern citizenship and habitation in Bombay. I argue here that Vishnu's emergence as a deity and ghost is very much enabled by his imagination of himself as a film star. In other words, the spectral logic of the film medium, which signifies in unfixed and unidentified ways, is the same logic that underlies Vishnu's haunting of the residents of his building. The event of his failed and incomplete death resurfaces in memory and visions for whom a phenomenon or process that can be explained as a function of cinematic understanding. Imaginative and social practice in Bombay are configured through a cinematic framework and contextualized in economic and social history.

To further my claim that cinematic spectrality constitutes of subaltern spectral citizenship, I ground my reading of Vishnu's spectral subjectivity within the discourse of secular citizenship by bringing the reader's attention to spectrality as it is historically spatialized in Bombay. Vishnu's haunting of the stairwell, indeed, his ghostly habitation, exceeds realist understandings of urban planning and architecture.²⁴ In reference to this spectral existence, Arjun Appadurai argues about Bombay:

To speak of spectrality in Bombay's housing scene moves us beyond the empirics of inequality into the experience of shortage, speculation, crowding, and public improvisation. It marks the space of speculation and specularities, empty scenes of dissolved industry, fantasies of urban planning, rumors of real estate transfers, consumption patterns that violate their spatial preconditions, and bodies that are their own housing. The absent, the ghostly, the speculative, the fantastic all have

²⁴Following Appadurai's larger argument regarding the state, one would attribute these social conditions not simply to any monolithically conceived state, but rather to the particular and peculiar combination of the disaggregated Indian state and the "financescapes" it makes itself apparent in now and again. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005): 328.

their part to play in the simultaneous excesses and lacks of Bombay's housing scene. It is these experienced absurdities that warrant my use of the spectral in a setting where housing and its lack are grossly real. What are these swollen realities?²⁵

The swollen reality that Appadurai describes is aptly portrayed in the representation of Vishnu's subalterneity as spectral, a condition which marks the inability and failure of the state's realist register in official secular policy, legislation, documentation, or urban planning, to contain the excess or magnitude of social and economic disparity, which is the purview of melodrama as an aesthetics of "failure."

Marginalized by the harsh changing economic conditions wrought by globalization as it arose in the 1980s, Vishnu as phantom represents those millions of subaltern figures who have been displaced by the city's growth as a global center, particularly in the transition from state-regulated socialist economy of manufacture and industry to the liberalization policies of 1991 inaugurating an economy of trade, tourism, and finance. The period described in the novel refers to a Bombay whose place as a model of civic life and economic growth was rapidly diminishing into thin air. Those rural poor who migrated in the hopes of partaking in the "magic of wealth, celebrity, glamour, and power" confronted a paucity of jobs and found themselves relegated to the city's "shadow economy" and reduced to being "economic refugees."²⁶ These changes dramatically altered the urban geography so that numbers and densities of shacks and slums grew with the populations of these locales spilling over into public places such as streets, beaches, parks, and cinema halls. This overcrowding led to the dispossession of subaltern figures who found that with actual housing so scarce, "their bodies are their

²⁵ Appadurai, "Spectral Housing," 637.

²⁶ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 328.

own housing,” also a feature of the present urban condition today. Those bodies are forced to occupy at a tremendous price, any space available, be it a rooftop, park bench, or, as in the case of Vishnu, a stairwell.²⁷

Although subaltern populations are present then in compounds, foyers, and enclosures, they are rendered spectral by the official tenants, who dissolve their relations to them when their labor capacity fails them:

The official tenants, owners, and landlords wage a constant war against this colonization from below, but it is frequently lost because—as in all societies based on financial apartheid—one wants the poor near at hand as servants but far away as humans.²⁸

For subaltern labor forced into these occupations, the expenditure of this affective or immaterial labor renders their laboring bodies spectral or perceived of as inhuman. That is, the exertion of affect in the process of laboring to satisfy one’s caste function depletes biopower, rendering the subaltern subject immaterial. This process, which has occurred as a result of the subaltern’s low-caste status, contradicts the very same policy of secularism that is meant to ensure that religious difference does not work against an individual citizen. In direct contradiction to its stated policy, the state furthers in its own attempt to consolidate power over individual interest groups by alienating marginalized sectors: Dalits and Muslims specifically. The rift resulting in civil society is caused by a failure of relations between various groups along religious and ethnic lines, a theme I take up in the following section.

²⁷ Appadurai, “Spectral Housing,” 629.

²⁸ Appadurai, “Spectral Housing,” 637.

Impersonation as specular mimesis

The tenants' indifference, characteristic of failed relations between them and Vishnu, results in his solitary death for sure but is present during his life as well. Compounding his isolation are his tenuous ties to others who are sympathetic to his sorry state but nonetheless are simply trying to survive themselves. For example, though his fellow workers tolerate his failings, he has little meaningful exchange with any individuals: he is alone. Indeed, realist accounts of Vishnu reduce him to the status of a loafer, drunk, and miscreant, implying that his impoverished condition is but a direct and linear consequence of his actions. The privileging of realist aesthetics masks the production of the work that melodrama does to represent in its contradictory form. His capacity for relating affectively is negated in the realist register—narrated in the novel's omniscient point of view, as well as his neighbor's representations of him. Through the melodramatic register and cinematic mediation, however, Vishnu's practice of re-imagining himself presents an alternative point of view.

Against the backdrop of this friendless state of affairs emerges Padmini, the prostitute with whom he spends his little leisure time. Though he uncharacteristically devotes himself to her, this relation ends in unrequited love, following the pattern of failed relations with employers and fellow servants that precede and follow. Melodramatic references inform the novel's description of their relationship with their outings often involving trips to the cinema and discussions devoted to comparing Padmini's beauty to a film star's. Padmini's rejection of Vishnu's love is surprisingly poignant, a feature underscored by the novel's deliberate failure to satisfy the reader with a romantic Bollywood happy ending.

In the following scene, having deceived his employer into hiring him as a driver, Vishnu drives away from the crowded city for a short respite at the hill station, Lonavala, with his employer's car. Vishnu contemplates his desire for a future as Padmini posed for an imaginary camera. She turns around and poses against the railing:

"I wish you had a camera," she pouts, stretching out against the poles and rubbing her body against them. The wind picks up and drapes her *dupatta* around her head. She looks up, the yellow silk veiling her face, and Vishnu thinks she might have just emerged from a temple.

"It's so nice that there's no one here," she says, and Vishnu moves to the railing next to her. All night, he has looked at her lying so close next to him, wanting to touch her, to taste her, to breathe her in.

"So beautiful," Padmini says, and stops, as Vishnu positions his lips next to hers. Before she can draw back, he kisses her through her veil. She looks down at the ground as he picks up the edges of the *dupatta* and raises it slowly up her face.

"Am I your bride?" she asks, as he kisses her on the forehead, then on the lips again.

"You ran away with me remember," he says.

"Then how many of these would you like?" Padmini asks, holding up the cloth doll. She waves it in his face. (105–106)

A practice of viewing melodramatic films provides him with a vocabulary to express his desire and acknowledge what has been denied to him, and what he is due in service for his labor and participation in society. Through a process of specular mimesis and the serial repetition of romantic gestures imagined to be markers of the autonomous modern couple,²⁹ Vishnu's character is haunted by his fantasy of domestic security, the impersonation of which drives him to realize the injustice of his situation. Vishnu internalizes the narrative family drama underlying melodrama. In these moments, Vishnu, without a private space to reflect, is forced to consider a future of

²⁹ Although the representation of the modern couple can be seen as an ideological heteronormative institution, in comparison to similarly oppressive structures such as the extended family or group living in close quarters, it is understandable why Vishnu might desire the institution of marriage.

projected failure, where, lacking leisure time, opportunity for companionship, or the possibility for economic improvement, he will remain without prospects, an unlikely match for anyone.

Melodramatic translation of these responses through spectral structuring configures Vishnu's desires for domesticity, companionship, and intimacy, states of being denied him by virtue of his subalterneity in both of these scenes. The internalization of that melodrama initiates a desire for a relation with another individual. At the same time, the sense of loss it produces also provides Vishnu with the realization of the injustice of the situation, which subsequently prompts Vishnu to thwart his employers' efforts to make him work more. In other words, his recognition of lost opportunity and longing provoked by melodrama pushes him to improvise a more pleasurable "failing" future.

In this scene, melodramatic conventions of iconic framing and tableau shots are better able than a documentary account to provide an account of the emotional consequences of economic and physical depravation, namely the affective loss provoked by social injustice.³⁰ Vishnu's description of the life he desires, the very one denied to him, is represented in the manner of a tableau shot or an image whose composition includes various elements of mise-en-scène such as the room, cupboard, bed, ration card, etc., which offers a visual summary of the emotional situation where Vishnu longs for a family and home:

For a moment, Vishnu thinks that here they are, the two of them, or maybe a family of three. They have come up to Lonavala, like other people, for a long-awaited holiday. Back in Bombay, they are a real

³⁰ For an analysis of the use of iconic framing and tableau shots in Indian cinema, see Ravi Vasudevan, "The Politics of Cultural Address in a 'Transitional Cinema': Indian Film", *Re-inventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Ruth Williams, (London: Arnold 2000).

couple, and real lives await them. Not rich ones, necessarily but ordinary lives. A flat or even a room, with a cupboard and a bed. A toilet that is probably shared, a kerosene stove like the one his mother had. An address and a ration card, a postman who brings them mail. A job to go to every morning, a woman to whom he is wed.

Perhaps it shows in his face, because Padmini stops smiling. For an instant, he thinks he glimpses concern mixed with the confusion in her expression. (105–106).

Vishnu realizes that his life is one whose romantic terms are determined, perhaps even provoked by the thematic structures of Bollywood romance on the one hand, but also by the limitations of his lived situation. According to Pankaj Mishra, this scene is one of the novel's most redeeming, as it seems to offer a realistic depiction of Vishnu's plight as well as Vishnu's consciousness of it. Mishra reads the language of the passage as florid until the novel describes Vishnu's jolt into reality from his reverie:

Despite the sentimentality, it is a very moving moment: a reminder of how much Vishnu's life as a lowly servant is a grim prison. Vishnu himself knows how hopeless the idea of escape is: he quickly wakes up to the "preposterousness of his images, the foolishness of his feelings," and he laughs at the absurdity of his longings for the small joys of middle-class life in Bombay.³¹

I argue contrary to this reading that this is a very moving moment *because* of the "sentimentality," rather than despite it. Moreover, to deem this moment sentimental seems to undervalue or dismiss a representation of desire that can hardly be considered self-indulgent as Mishra's description suggests.

Vishnu's wishes are after all simple longings for a simple lived experience of basic material domestic and economic security. Vishnu's moment of recognition and perhaps redemption emerges from his feeling of longing for his fantasy future, the mimesis of which draws Vishnu out of his abjection enough to provide a space for an autonomous use of his affective labor, one that will not be channeled further by the state or his employers. The insistence

³¹ Mishra, "Dreaming of Mangoes."

on the primacy of truth-value of realist aesthetics prevents Mishra from noting the potential in a subversive use of melodramatic conventions.

For Mishra the representation of Vishnu's affective response undermines the force of social criticism. For example, Mishra describes the moment as "moving" because the scene powerfully describes the denial of subaltern access to privacy, intimacy, and pleasure ensuing from living in impoverished conditions. Implicit in Mishra's analysis is the idea that real meaning emerges from the representation of psychological development and aspects of narrative movement associated with conventions of Hollywood continuity editing typically absent in melodrama.³² Mishra's analysis, with its stress on realist aesthetics fails to acknowledge elements of melodramatic representation produce meaning as well.

This failure emerges from the economic conditions that structure his poverty and hers. Like Vishnu, Padmini has migrated to the city in search of a better future. Like many millions who come to the city seeking prosperity but find instead poverty, Padmini is consumed with making ends meet and as a result has neither the time nor the physical and psychic resources to consider a relationship for herself. As a sex worker, moreover, her work is predicated upon her affective ties necessarily being configured in her relations to her clients, leaving her with little in the way of resources to have her own personal relationships. That is to say, her survival as a sex worker rests on an expenditure of affective labor that leaves her without an affective response for a relation that might otherwise sustain her well-being, namely with Vishnu, who wants her to have a better life even as he himself is destitute.³³

³² Vasudevan, "Politics of Cultural Address," 130–164.

³³ Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *boundary 2* 26 (Summer 1999): 89–100. I am drawing on Hardt's argument on affective labor as constitutive this time as *gendered and feminized* subaltern subjectivity.

The novel's framing of Padmini, veiled by her *dupatta*, assumes importance as Vishnu likens her image to a figure emerging from a temple. His association of her mood with a rare solemnity offers the briefest reprieve from the grinding quality of work and routine. Indeed, as a literary representation of the visual convention known as iconic framing, whereby representation occurs through a condensation of meaning through a single image, that of Padmini, whose iconic depiction and performance bears traces of her own desire for transformation emerging from impersonation and masquerade. The image falls short of functioning stereotypically as the mundane elements of the *mise-en-scène* undercut its archetypal potential.

The critique of Mishra's demand for realism notwithstanding, I do not mean to imply that Mishra would deny the severity of the social injustice that produces the need for such a depiction in the first place. Rather I would suggest that Mishra's critique of the melodramatic underpinnings and overvaluing realist aesthetics overlooks the importance of representations of expressions of subaltern desire that can perhaps best be expressed at times through a popular mode such as melodrama.

"Failure" as ethics

If in the previous section we saw how filmic narrative, however flawed and limited, nonetheless, through repetition and memory offered Vishnu a script to perform or depart from, in this section, I explore how the incorporation of a film image promotes a process of modeling one's own subjectivity on one's perception of it. Vishnu's construction of his own new subjectivity gives rise to an ethical understanding whereby he reconfigures his ideas about and responses to others' well being. His practice of viewing films initiates an

internalization of their narrative structures. Following the plot of Bollywood films, he mimetically lives through the life of a romantic hero. Processes of fantasy and projection leave him perceiving little distinction between the two. Indeed Vishnu's act of mimesis provokes him to recreate a copy, albeit "bad copy," of a Bollywood scene and produce his relationship with Padmini through its structures.³⁴

The following section focuses on how an internalization of the practice of viewing films and immersing oneself with the image can also inflect one's perception of self and other, that is of subject and object, along the lines of spectator and image. The line between subject and object blurs as the film image is incorporated through a practice of the imagination. The consequences of this process are immense for Vishnu, whose incorporation of this process transforms him into a ghost. His spectral existence is premised on the indeterminate distinction between himself and others.

Transforming into a ghost, the novel describes Vishnu at first laying in the stairwell and awakening to tiny reverberations all around him. Crawling alongside a stream of ants, he slowly makes his way up the spiral stairs of the building, leaving behind the body in which his more mundane self resided. Along the way, he encounters his quarrelsome employers, Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani, who have just dismissed Mrs. Jalal's suggestion that the building hand over Vishnu's body to the *hajrat* society, a Muslim charity for the dying and the destitute on the grounds that he is Hindu.³⁵ Overhearing their

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³⁵ Arguing that the Muslim charity is inappropriate for Vishnu, a Hindu, the two women berate Mrs. Jalal for implying that the Hindu community lacks similar philanthropic inclinations. The women shamelessly overlook the fact that they have barely even verified that he is alive.

conversation, Vishnu, notes their revulsion but then slips on a stream of ants.

His own spectral state prods him into the following ethical inquiry:

Vishnu wonders how many ants he has killed. All those bodies he has crushed, did they all have voices? He lifts his foot to clear the ants on the landing, then stops. His animosity has vanished, he will not bring it down. He watches the cheese move along the thread, it is almost at the door of the kitchen now.

Voices come through the door. Mrs. Asrani and Mrs. Pathak are discussing his body. How curious, he thinks, when he is right outside, listening to them. How surprised they will be when they see him standing there.

It is Mrs. Asrani who comes out first. She looks straight at him, but does not see him. Mrs. Pathak is right behind her, carrying her cup of tea as well. Her gaze falls upon the ants, her eyes widen at the sight of the cheese. "Damn ants," she cries, and kicks the cheese across the landing. She lifts her sandal and brings it down repeatedly on the convoy.

The screams are so loud that Vishnu covers his ears. He thinks of children run over by cars, families crushed by buildings, people burnt alive. He covers his ears to keep the agony out, but the screams claw them apart and burrow into his brain. (83)³⁶

From the petty thief who stole small change and even his employer's car, Vishnu transforms here into an ethical subject, empathetic to the pain of unknown others. He turns his attention to other sentient beings he himself might be hurting despite his own extreme state of duress through a process of inter-subjectivity initiated by his practice of viewing films. His visual and visceral response shifts him into a state of heightened recognition and knowledge. He newly awakens to a sense of alternative ways of relating to others. In this affective circuit, he is outside the realm of relating to the other

³⁶ Although I do not examine in detail here the description of the attack on the Muslim residents of the building by their Hindu extremist neighbors, there is good reason to relate these attacks as an oblique reference to ongoing communal conflicts and even recent historical events, namely the 1993 Bombay bomb blasts, which killed almost 250 people and injured up to 1000, many of them Muslim. The blasts were blamed on individuals allegedly affiliated with Muslim extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Toiba. These blasts followed riots that occurred in Bombay after the destruction of the Babri Masjid or mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 by extremist Hindu groups covertly supported by the state. Dileep Padgaonkar, *When Bombay Burned* (New Delhi: UBSPD, 1993).

as a self and instead engages in a form of radical relationality enabled by his ability to imagine and actually feel the pain of an other. This imagination and ethical extension is provoked by and would be impossible without his engagement with the cinematic medium.

Here, the logic of cinematic spectrality permits the ghost Vishnu to watch the events of his life unfold as he sits much like a spectator watching a screen. This practice of viewing through cinematic mediation provokes an affective response, whereby image and spectator subject are brought into proximity, which in turn initiates a new form of relationality to that which is represented here, namely the ants who come to stand in for all sentient beings. Indeed, the technology of popular Hindi cinema produces an experience of simultaneity contained in multiple imagined and lived realities for a single spectator.

The most dramatic description of how cinematic mediation produces subaltern subjectivity emerges at the novel's conclusion where melodramatic affect becomes materialized in a scene where Vishnu's body becomes one with its representation on screen. Vishnu and Padmini attend a screening of the film, *The Death of Vishnu*, the ending of which depicts Vishnu's ascent up the stairs of the building as a ghost. As the scene in the film progresses to its conclusion in the novel, Padmini momentarily excuses herself with the promise to return. In her absence, the film stops and darkness engulfs the entire theater. As Padmini leaves, the screen goes blank without explanation, prompting Vishnu to investigate in the darkness:

Vishnu walks across the center of the stage, then turns to face the projector. The screen is a giant lit field extending above and around him. He tries to see the seats, but the light from the projector is too strong. For all he knows, they may be filled again. Padmini and the rest of the audience getting ready to applaud as he takes his final bow.

He looks hard at the light. For an instant, he imagines the screen stretching out across the sky above the terrace. Then the image vaporizes in the blaze of a projector. He wonders what makes the light so strong. Why can he just see white when he looks into it? Where are the greens and reds that dance across his clothes? He looks at his body—it is drenched in color. His arms, his hands, his legs are luminous, brilliant. He feels the brilliance being absorbed through his skin, saturating his flesh, flowing through his blood all the way to his fingertips. He starts radiating brilliance himself. Brilliance that illuminates each row of empty seats, brilliance that paints each wall a blinding white, brilliance that turns the curtains into sheets of light. As Vishnu watches, the entire theater becomes incandescent. He looks down at himself, but can no longer tell where the light ends and his body begins. (279)

The conventional reading of this scene might be that Vishnu, the servant, transforms himself into Vishnu, the deity, in the way that Krishna is described as taking *darshan* of his original form of Vishnu in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a scene that the novel evokes when Vishnu's former employer, Mr. Jalal, sees too Vishnu transform into the deity.³⁷ Rather than claim that the scene confirms Orientalist ideas of an eternally timeless spirituality, an opinion shared by many of the critics I examined, I argue, rather, that the novel lays bare the consequences of Vishnu's status as a live ghost or spectral citizen by bringing together the two definitions of representation: portrait and proxy. The impossible occurs in the description: Vishnu embodies representation as sign, signifier, and signified. The novel, moreover, depicts how the visual address of the melodramatic devotional film solicits a circuit for the movement of Vishnu's affective response and in turn an understanding of his role in spectatorship, pushing him to understand that the filmic representation of his spectrality possesses a material quality lacking in citizenship.

In realizing that he constitutes that which has been represented on screen, Vishnu is represented as embodying that which his imagination

³⁷ *Bhagavada Gita*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Bantam, 1991).

projects. In this way, the novel suggests that affect, most often dismissed as immaterial, is in fact substantive and sensual. In realizing the combination of the image and his response, he materializes his spectral subject position; he occupies a position denied him as a citizen subject. Where the state fails to offer him the possibility of a sovereign citizen subject position, Vishnu produces an alternative one for himself.

In other words, if in life he had no subject position, in this example of affective identification with an image, Vishnu produces multiple subject positions: spectator, subject, and protagonist. Moreover, his multiple subject positions imply an inhabitation of multiple temporalities—the time of perception and the time of being perceived. This is also the logic enabled by the emergence of cinematic time that enables Vishnu to feel his own pain simultaneously with that of other living creatures, including the ants in the building stairwell. The mobilization of an irrational and affective response provides the subaltern figure the potential for a subjective position, as well as ethical understanding disavowed by secular policy.

The state's realist account of subalterneity erases a figure like Vishnu from its narrative of the nation and denies him a space of subjectivity as expressed in the novel's community of Hindus and Muslims. Its utter disregard for his life demonstrates its disavowal. The troping of this spectral citizenship, one that simultaneously renders him invisible in his apparent visibility, is reversed or subverted through this representation of Vishnu as simultaneously the subject *and* object of this scenario.

Vishnu's transformation into the very materiality of the film he views—the image and the screen—simultaneously depicts his reduction to a specter in

life as well as the mobilization of his “apparent historical defeat.”³⁸ Here, spectrality as affective projection redeems the foreclosed future ensured by the unjust policy of the secular state. If in the previously examined scene where he attempts to recreate a romance with Padmini through a performance of a typical Bollywood plot, in this scene Vishnu internalizes not only the plot but also the medium itself. In realizing that his consciousness is constituted through his interaction with the cinematic medium, Vishnu realizes he has a subject position premised on this.³⁹ He transforms this failure into realization of the materiality of ideology and its constitution through affect, of what one understands as oneself.

Although the novel concludes with a projection of Vishnu’s rebirth and a consideration of the fact that potential specular mimesis can result in a version of affective identification that can be channeled towards dubious ends such as the growing Hindu authoritarianism of the state, nonetheless, the staging of cinephilia reveal that affective identification currently channeled by the state is simply another version of fatal love, that is love for the nation. The moment of cinephilia discussed above reveals that affect may also be channeled in the service of producing a radical inter-subjectivity whose challenge to the secular as we know it may also be fatal.

³⁸ David Lloyd, “The Subaltern in Motion: Subalternity, the Popular, and Irish Working Class History,” *Postcolonial Studies* 8.4 (November 2005): 435.

³⁹ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, “Epic Melodrama: Themes of Nationality in Indian Cinema,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 25-26 (December 1993).

Conclusion: “Just in time”

In the event of Vishnu’s death, none of the characters is able to depart from or re-imagine his or her secular understanding of difference in order to defy the strictures of caste that their status decrees: not a single secular individual helps Vishnu because of his low-caste background. This indifference is permissible within the secular understanding of society as it is rendered in realist terms in India today. Such an example shows up the limits of this secularism as it is practiced. Here, Bharucha’s claim that the state policy and everyday understanding of *sarva dharma*, *sarva bhava*, equal respect for all religions, does not hold true. It certainly does not entitle Vishnu to equal respect even though he is actually Hindu, therefore ostensibly protected under the mandate of Hindutva.

Vishnu’s failed death in between the spaces of what we might think of as state or civil society protects either from being accountable to the subaltern condition. If, as mentioned earlier, the state produces a reality “so swollen” as to exceed the “empirics” of a realist rendering of the same, and renders the subaltern spectral, then melodramatic excess redeems the spectral as productive of subaltern desire and subjectivity through cinematic mediation. Faced with the grim reality of his own fate—a lonely death in disrepute and seemingly foreclosed from redemption—Vishnu improvises a future otherwise denied to him. Reduced to having “a death worse than a dog’s” (151), according to the estimation of Short Ganga, his fellow servant, Vishnu haunts the failing present with the vision or aspiration of a potentially redemptive future as a ghost. Ironically, this failure to die properly and return as a ghost defies reason; it makes more sense than the categorical refusal of his

fellow tenants to act reasonably, that is to acknowledge Vishnu as equally human.

CHAPTER SIX

REASONS TO “FAIL”

Those elements of the popular that show recalcitrance to the disciplines of state and civil society come to be seen as symptomatic of the obstinate backwardness of a people damaged by colonialism, and the post-colonial national elite assumes attitudes once characteristic of the coloniser. And yet, ironically, the very concept of the popular, by virtue of its intimate relation to the state, is irreducibly a modern one. The very elements that get typed as backward are in fact unthinkable except as effects of modernity.¹

In conclusion, I have tried to demonstrate that the ideological, political, and legal potential of the state's efforts to perpetuate stereotypical images of minoritized individuals through “Hindu national realism” is formidable. This practice is perhaps most visible in the way that the state attempts to erase the image and silence the articulation of the “failed” subject. This process reduces the subaltern or minority individual to a spectral citizen, absent in her presence, dead in life, vis-à-vis the state. The state relies on the fiction of “Hindu national realism” to reproduce its chauvinist discourse, seemingly leaving her with no recourse. The task of translating, or making legible, her subjectivity is facilitated, however, through the mediation of the melodramatic mode in the Indian postcolonial context. In the mode's use of affect to materialize, or indeed make community possible, the subaltern subject emerges through a non-realist register. This is not to say that all melodramatic texts have the capacity to represent the spectral condition inhabited by minoritized individuals; but, in comparison to the realist prose of the law, melodrama's emphasis on affect as an expression that challenges the linear

¹ David Lloyd, “The Subaltern in Motion: Subalternity, the Popular, and Irish Working Class History” *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 8.4 (November 2005): 427.

causality underlying realist representation, the concept of what signifies reason demands a more complex and nuanced understanding.

It is not clear how the critique of reason underlying secularism in India could be used to re-imagine state policy. At least in terms of calling for the possibility to advocate for the articulation of the unreasonable, Partha Chatterjee argues that at the site where governmentality is unable to encompass sovereignty successfully, cultural rights can be avowed, and that too through categories that force us to imagine reason otherwise:

The assertion of minority cultural rights occurs at such a site. It is because of a contestation on sovereignty that the right is asserted *against governmentality*. To say, “We will not give reasons for not being like you,” is to resist entering into that deliberative or discursive space where the technologies of governmentality operate. But then, in a situation like this, the only way to resist submitting to the powers of literally to declare oneself unreasonable.²

Obviously, this formulation yields problems for the state in determining an official policy with regard to secularism. Nonetheless, it makes apparent a need to imagine communities and to understand the other with the aims of securing difference within the secular in a fashion predicated not on an instrumentalized understanding of the other, but, rather, on terms of ethical “failure.” If we recall Kumkum Sangari’s call to imagine a “politics of the possible,” here we must heed the imperative to imagine a politics of the impossible brought to our attention by these representations of subaltern acts of imagination.³ Such an understanding is vital because it is the only one that allows representations of seemingly autonomous subaltern narration of “failure,” not entirely circumscribed by state categories. Perhaps, more importantly, it makes the impossible possible; put another way, in “failure”

² Partha Chatterjee, “Secularism and Tolerance,” *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 372.

³ Kumkum Sangari, “The Politics of the Possible,” *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): 157–186.

emerges dissent to acquiesce to so-called reasonable terms signified by the discourse of the secular, while at the same time arises a self-understanding of unreasonable death in life, nonetheless characterized by a modicum of dignity.

Such an intervention might begin at the site of public culture as the examples discussed in this dissertation demonstrate. The category of reason that underlies the ideal of the secular, namely religious tolerance, is inadequate for explaining the state of abjection to which protagonists, such as Saleem, Shanta, and Vishnu, are reduced in the literary and film narratives that constitute public debate. In particular, reason loses its explanatory potential in making comprehensible the events of their deaths and spectral lives. It seems also unable to determine the logic underlying relations between individuals and communities. Here, the articulation of difference is at odds with the discourse of universal rights because it is incommensurable with the rational language that constitutes those rights. More importantly, the main characters—*Ayah*, Saleem, and Vishnu—subject to the contradictory definitions of secularism as they are, have in common the feature that instances of ethical knowledge emerge through experiences of impersonation and coincidence vis-à-vis the expression of affective understanding, represented in the film and novels through an aesthetics of “failure.”

In the split second in *Earth* when Hassan suggests that he could become a Hindu, or *Ayah* could become a Muslim in order to marry, he does not suggest that they abandon their religious identities altogether. *Ayah* responds by saying that she is his regardless of her faith, also a sense of religious identity as non-essential. It is their sense of the secular as “worldly” that allows Hassan to suggest that he can become a Hindu, or that Hindu and Muslim identities are inter-changeable with regard to his self-understanding.

It is through *Ayah's* assumption that religious identity is singular that she asserts a modern sensibility, that is, a sense of the secular that understands religion as neither identitarian nor prescriptive. Similarly, in *Midnight's Children*, "magic" as an explanatory concept deriving from cinema stands in for a modern community aspired to by midnight's children. Imagining the nation through the specular categories of cinema—coincidence and impersonation—Saleem produces an embodied knowledge of his fellow citizens, whose differences notwithstanding remain the affective source of his ethical interest and regard for their well-being as his own. The representation of Saleem as a composite subject as well as the varied representation of Muslim femininity represented by the character of Amina, famously picturized through a hole in a bed sheet and Naseem, her free-loving Communist daughter, undermines the essentializing stereotypes associated with Muslim identity, namely that Islam engenders fundamentalism, violence, and submission, all aspects that demonstrate a lack of rationality. Instead, these figures navigate their religious identities in distinctly autonomous and surprising ways, the examples of which challenges the rubrics of uniform civil law advocated by the insistence on Hindutva as state ideology. Finally, the subaltern character Vishnu deploys his melodramatic imagination to impersonate Vishnu, the deity, so as to avail himself of the rights of movement and association ascribed to his fellow citizens. The novel suggests that the ethical experience of religion might not be that dissimilar to that of going to the movies. The imaginative practice he engages in draws on the critical and reformist aspects of the Bhakti traditions in Hinduism, representing that modernity—figured as change, autonomy, and newness—transforms religious

practice so that it can no longer be associated with a stable set of textual understandings or rituals.

As previously discussed, social science scholarship has dominated the discussion on the secular/religious impasse examined in the first chapter. It would seem that the binaristic understanding of these two concepts might productively be re-conceptualized in much the way melodrama as an aesthetics of “failure” represents affect: that is, as a concept that implies simultaneity through the coincidence of cognitive and physical faculties. Theorizing an affective response undoes the sense of linearity upon which the concept of causality is predicated. Just as affective understanding suggests that reason and action produce and are produced by cognition as well as corporeal and visceral responses, so, too, secularism and religion should be understood to be mutually constitutive. The representations of affect as a feature of secular *and* religious realms might demystify religious difference as understandings predicated on “‘otherworldly’, ‘transcendental’, ‘totalizing’, and ultimately an immature” perspectives while secularism, particularly the sort practiced by the Indian state, might be revealed to be less informed by the “freedom, human creativity, and autonomy” associated with Enlightenment ideals.⁴ It is in this area that I would hope that a cultural studies project such as this dissertation would intervene. With the capacity of this field of study to examine the imagination as a practice, the radically plural and varied practices of religion constituting the everyday lives of billions of people might be made to seem less like exercises in false consciousness, tradition, or repression⁵—failures—which are precisely the understandings enabling the questionable

⁴ Saba Mahmood, “Is Critique Secular? A Symposium at UC Berkeley,” *Public Culture* 20.3 (2008): 447–452.

⁵ Amardeep Singh, “World Religions and Media Culture,” *Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture and Politics* 12 (2000): 3–11.

achievements or “successes” of our contemporary moment: “war without end.” Simultaneously, a focus on the constitutive role of affect in secularism might reveal the very enchantments and affiliations that incline its espousers to herald it as the prevailing marker of modernity.

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