

## Transitions, Transactions: Bollywood As a Signifying Practice

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Not much needs to be said while introducing the subject of 'Bollywood'. The term is ubiquitous, as familiar today as 'Hollywood' was in the 1920s and '30s. The extraordinary worldwide success of Bollywood productions such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (dir. Karan Johar, 1998) marked the emergence of a global Bollywood 'boom' in the mid-1990s, widely regarded as the sign of an epochal shift in the status of 'other' national, regional or vernacular cinemas. Ten years later, in 2007, one could argue that Bollywood's monopoly on the space that it cleared and occupied for a few years has evolved to form different patterns, and that the geography of world cinema is being re-mapped in part by Hong Kong cinema, Iranian cinema, and increasingly, Nigeria-based 'Nollywood' cinema. The seemingly inexplicable global fan cultures surrounding Indian actors such as Shah Rukh Khan and Rajnikant, and the remarkable transnational success of films recognised as bearing the 'Bollywood' brand, attest to the unique status of Bollywood today – it is perhaps *the* contemporary practice which has come closest to achieving a global idiom of expression on par with the success and spread of classical Hollywood in the early part of the century.

But how do we address this phenomenon? What does Bollywood signify, and for whom? Is it an industry, a cultural practice, or simply an *idea*? Can the factors which determined the success of classical Hollywood in an earlier era shed any light on the current appeal of Bollywood? What 'meanings' do spectators generate through engaging with Bollywood films, and what negotiations take place globally, via the frontier of 'Bollywood'?

### Virtual Proliferations

The search term "Bollywood" generates more than 24 million hits on Google, when compared to "Indian Cinema" which draws a mere three million. Of these, many bloggers refer to one particularly popular website as the 'Bollywood Film Generator'. The site, Bombay TV, allows visitors to choose from a wide sampling of brief Indian film clips, and add subtitles of their own to the scenarios depicted, in any one of five major world languages.<sup>1</sup> The clips are not restricted to films produced in Bombay, as the title of the website suggests, but are a random selection from a variety of genres, production contexts

and eras, ranging from 1960s Marathi mythologicals to recent Tamil films to 1970s Hindi 'Westerns' starring the legendary Amitabh Bachchan. Notably, none of the clips are very recent – films made in the last decade are not represented.

The semiotic discourses surrounding this website are fascinating. The idea of creating a 'subtitle generator' is very suggestive. On the one hand, the absence of any 'real' subtitles in the clips reminds us of the role of the subtitle as cultural and linguistic translation in the international distribution of (particularly non-Hollywood) films. This has implications not only for international audiences but also audiences *within* India – the film clips are in multiple Indian languages, which means that in their non-subtitled form, they would by no means *all* be accessible to *all* Indian audiences. Therefore, whether or not the creators of the website intend this, the activity of 'fake subtitling' can be taken on with relative ingenuity by internet-using audiences with any level of familiarity with Indian cinema within India as well as abroad – provided of course that they are literate in one of the five language options! The other suggestion inherent in the invitation to subtitle is that the tropes and formal elements of the film clips are so universally recognisable that anyone can 'guess' at what is being signified by the clip, and in doing so, supplementally invest the film text with their own culturally and inter-textually imbued signification. Finally, the finished 'subtitled' clip can be made public and distributed online under the name of the subtitler, so that the spectator becomes not only a consumer of a commodity, but a *producer* of meaning, and a visible participant in a complex global economy of meaning-making.

The decision by web-users and bloggers to rename the Bombay TV website 'Bollywood Film Generator' is also important. Noting the de-historicising tendency in the recently naturalised international use of the term 'Bollywood' to designate what was previously known as 'Hindi', 'Bombay' or 'Indian' popular cinema, film studies scholar Madhava Prasad (2003) has suggested that 'Bollywood' tends to be used as an empty signifier applicable to "any set of signifieds within the realm of Indian cinema"<sup>2</sup>. Hence, for instance, the seeming confusion of designating the multitude of varied clips under the totalising banner of 'Bollywood'. I propose, however, that the aforementioned act of renaming suggests that 'Bollywood' is not merely an overdetermined signifier but a highly sophisticated signifying practice, whereby significations of a desire to be recognised as *modern* are made globally available for negotiating and ordering the postmodern world of media commodities.

### **'Bollywood', 'Hollywood': Modern or Postmodern?**

Madhava Prasad reads the linguistic turn to 'Bollywood' as an index of socioeconomic transformations in the Indian film industry and its audiences of Indian origin. He links the phenomenon of Bollywood with a series of industrial changes in the mid-1990s that signalled a new reflexivity in Indian cinema's relationship with modernity and modernisation. These changes include generational transformations within the Indian film industries, the rise of elite-school- or foreign-educated young directors and stars, increasing financial support from wealthy non-resident Indian (NRI) tycoons, and a related global proliferation of diffuse activities surrounding the distribution and consumption of Indian 'culture'. Along with

these changes emerged an internationally popular ‘access-for-all’ brand of Indian film distinguished by generic and stylistic hybridity, high production values, elaborately choreographed song-dance sequences, internationally recognised stars, and ‘return-to-roots’ themes. Prasad attributes the naming of such productions ‘Bollywood’ films largely to the prevailing ‘will-to-name’ of the economically mobile (or as he puts it, “English-speaking”) classes of India, who wish to reconstitute an existing reality in their own image. The industry, in a moment of reflexivity, is responding to this *desire to be recognised as modern*, which is dialectically related to the desire for the reproduction of difference that Bollywood represents on a world platform. In other words, Bollywood as a brand represents an ‘otherness’ which commands a certain desirable exchange value in the global market, both the ‘market’ of commodified identities and the economic market.

Prasad traces the origins of the naming of ‘Bollywood’ back to the paternalistic modernising impulses of classical Hollywood cinema – the name ‘Tollywood’ (merging ‘Hollywood’ with the Calcutta locality of ‘Tollygunge’) was first given to the earliest concentration of Indian motion picture studios in Calcutta in 1932, to designate the coming of modernity to India in the image and form of the Hollywood studio production system. And although the film industry in India is thought to have assumed its current form since roughly the 1950s, only after intense lobbying on the part of the film industry was it finally awarded ‘industry status’ by the government in 1998.<sup>3</sup> The popularity of the name ‘Bollywood’ appears to coincide temporally with this official acknowledgement of the Indian film industry’s parity with the standard of modern economic and industrial mass production and consumption that Hollywood represented in the 1930s.

This sociological analysis of ‘Bollywood’ as produced by the ‘will-to-name’ of domestic and NRI communities is certainly useful in speaking to a certain ‘developmental’ desire for global recognition as modern, in a bid to gain market power. However, this explanation does not go very far in addressing the desires of the diverse global participants on the Bombay TV website, who are most certainly not restricted to communities with a vested interest in Indian modernisation and economic power. The subtitled clips generated and publicised by the website users through their engagement with ‘Bollywood’ display not just a ‘will-to-name’ but a will to *consume* meaning, and to reciprocally *produce* meaning for consumption and infinite re-signification. Hence on the one hand ‘Bollywood’ seems to function as an interface for the subject to negotiate new urban spaces and modes of work associated with technology, and on the other hand generates a means of coping with respect to the consumer being pressurised to choose between commodities in strictly regulated domains – that nonetheless appear ‘free’.

### **Bollywood as Vernacular Modernism**

Miriam Hansen’s writings on the remarkable success of classical Hollywood cinema, and her theory of “vernacular modernism” may be a useful model in the analysis of Bollywood as a signifying practice.<sup>4</sup> Hansen suggests that the global appeal of classical Hollywood cinema was based in part on its self-promotion as a practice on par with “the experience of

modernity”, as an industrially produced, mass-based medium inscribed with the promise of mass consumption as well as the more elusive qualities of modernity, such as youth, vitality and speed associated with the signifier ‘America’. Moreover, as a hybridised idiom amalgamated from heterogeneous cultural traditions, discourses and forms at the domestic level, it may have had an increased diasporic and cosmopolitan appeal abroad.

According to Hansen, the key to the global resonance of classical Hollywood film lay in its ability to generate a *cultural counterpart* to technological, economic and social modernity. She coins the term “vernacular modernism” to explain the reflexive capacities of classical Hollywood for functioning as “the first global sensory vernacular”. As a specifically modern discursive form, classical Hollywood possessed the *reflexive potential* for individual experience to be articulated and find recognition. Moreover, as a translatable and transnational idiom, it presented an aesthetic frontier enabling diverse audiences to engage with the experience of industrial mass society, and modernity. This engagement occurred through plot, performance, *mise-en-scène* and genre; slapstick, for instance, was a critical site for invoking the problems and tensions of a multi-ethnic society. Crucially, these reflexive negotiations are anchored in *sensory experience*, since for Hansen, following Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, it is at the level of the senses that modes of perception are fundamentally recalibrated by the impact of modern technology. Hansen asserts that classical Hollywood brought into “optical consciousness” hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception and organisation. She adds, “[...] reflexivity does not always have to be critical or unequivocal; on the contrary, the reflexive dimension of these films may consist precisely in the ways in which they allow the viewers to confront the constitutive ambivalence of modernity”.

In other analyses, Hansen proposes that other national cinemas, Hollywood’s ‘others’, also functioned as distinct vernacular modernisms in the early part of the century, by generating *local* strategies of negotiating modernity through processes of cultural translation in a complex relation to American, foreign and traditional models. Shanghai cinema, for instance, remained a local rather than global vernacular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, on account of various barriers to entry to the global market. Hansen wonders what we would find if that process were to extend “in the other direction, in the form of products that could be exported and circulate internationally”<sup>5</sup>. The phenomenon of Bollywood films, which make globally available an *autoethnography* of India within a unique frontier of otherness, poses precisely this challenge: how to theorise the ‘other’ cinema in question when it becomes a practice of *production* fully on par with the technological, economic and social experience of modernity in the context of postmodern globalised cultures of *consumption*. Does Bollywood represent parity with a certain ‘standard’ of modernity deferred by the process of development? Or is it representative of, as Hansen suggests, a global, postmodern cinema of “diversities”, which is replacing in totality the unifying tendencies of classical Hollywood cinema and its representative age of modern mass culture?<sup>6</sup>

The postmodern trajectory is not a neat epochal shift but rather a fragmented, partial and unequal one, characterised by disjunctions, transitions and aporias. For former colonies, in particular, the experience of modernity is an ongoing contestation, informed by diverse

forces of development and competing cultural, economic and political agendas. At any rate, Hansen's model of vernacular modernism provides certain ideas and terms, such as reflexivity, sense perception, optical consciousness and organisation of the self in relation to the world, which are useful in apprehending the contemporary function of Bollywood.

The remainder of this essay considers these questions through an investigation of the formal strategies of two Indian films whose relation to each other pivots on the definition of modernity. P.C. Barua's *Devdas* (1936), adapted from a turn-of-the-century Indian novel, is frequently analysed as one of the first cinematic texts to formulate an Indian modernity. *Devdas* has been remade over 17 times in as many languages, leading many theorists to ponder what about this text renders it so inexhaustible to the 'Indian imagination'. The most recent version of the film is Sanjay Leela Bhansali's spectacular 2002 'Bollywood' remake. Self-promoted as a mega Bollywood production, Bhansali's *Devdas* was an international success. It swept almost every category in India's 2003 Filmfare awards, was India's official entrant for the Best Foreign Film category at the 2002 Oscar awards, and was even chosen to be screened at Cannes in 2002. Alleged then to be the most expensive production to have been mounted in India, and featuring an updated plot of global proportions, internationally famous stars and choreographed musical numbers of fantastic scope, the scale of the most recent *Devdas* seems almost unthinkable in comparison to Barua's modest 1936 film.

My analysis limits itself to these two films from two historical moments (that function almost as bookends to Indian modernity), while bracketing all intermediate remakes.

### **An Early Vernacular... with an Expiry Date?**

*Devdas* (dir. P.C. Barua, 1936) is an adaptation from a 1907 Bengali novel by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, a modernist writer often described as "India's first professional writer"<sup>7</sup>. A production of New Theaters, one of the two initial sound studios dubbed 'Tollywood' in the 1930s, and released in Calcutta while India was still under British rule, *Devdas* is a fundamental text in terms of an aesthetic rendering of an Indian 'modernity'. The director was the British-educated son of an elite, estate-owning aristocrat. In the context of India's nascent, fluctuating and marginal film culture, *Devdas* represents a pioneering attempt to hybridise and adapt the new film medium to Indian conditions, stylistic forms and tastes. I read Barua's film to have functioned very much as an instance of vernacular modernism specific to the 1930s urban Indian context. Film as a medium thematised and made visible the contradictions of an Indian modernity, providing a matrix for the articulation and mediation of the pre-Independence era's ambivalent fantasies, uncertainties, and anxieties regarding class and caste mobility, and urban migration.

*Devdas* narrates the story of the indecisive son of a powerful rural landed family. Prohibited by caste differences from marrying Paro, the girl he desires, the young man finds solace in a city courtesan, Chandramukhi. Caught in a limbo between the traditional values of his village and the permissive ethos of the Westernised city of Calcutta, Devdas takes to drink and eventually dies a vagabond. Several historians have written about the enduring appeal of

the *Devdas* story for “the Indian psyche” in an auto-essentialist vein, attributing the phenomenal number of remakes and adaptations of *Devdas* to the “timeless” relevance of the



archetypal tropes that the three main characters are based on, although these melodramatic forms and thematic structures often themselves tended to be hybridised colonial imports.<sup>8</sup> I am more inclined to read the historical appeal of the ‘weak hero’ type of the Devdas character and its later reincarnations (the “angry marginalised hero” popularised by Amitabh Bachchan blockbusters in the 1970s and the “psychotic hero” of 1990s Hindi cinema, frequently enacted by Shah Rukh Khan) in line with discourses of colonialism and crises of gender.<sup>9</sup> Cultural theorist Ashis Nandy has written convincingly of the centrality of the ambivalent, bicultural, tragic and androgynous figure of P.C. Barua himself (the star of his own original Bengali version of *Devdas*, 1935) to early fan-cultures surrounding the film. Traces of the Barua mystique persisted and evolved around subsequent remakes, including the 1936 version starring the famed singer K.L. Saigal, who like Barua was an

alcoholic, and died young.<sup>10</sup> Dilip Kumar, the star of Bimal Roy’s *Devdas* (1955), promoted himself as a ‘tragic’ hero, while Shah Rukh Khan, the star of Bhansali’s *Devdas* (2002), is often discussed in fanzines with regard to his alleged bisexuality.

The articulation of ambivalence is structurally central to *Devdas* (1936). I read the figure of Devdas to function within the film as a *structural analogue of cinema itself*. He is pure presence, a reactive medium upon and through which the experience of modernity is enacted. Through him, not only are both the village and the city constructed as spaces of fundamental ambivalence, but the female characters of Paro and Chandramukhi are also inscribed with an ambivalence that complicates the conventional readings of them in terms of simple binary tropes such as the ‘self-sacrificing housewife’ and the ‘prostitute with a heart of gold’. When Devdas leaves the village for Calcutta, Paro confides to a friend, “My Devdas isn’t like any other”, insisting that Devdas is immune to the corrupting influences of the city. And indeed, although not in the exact tenor of Paro’s sentiment, Devdas resists not only the city but also the village, and relentlessly seeks to sever his ties from any markers of identity. He later says to the courtesan Chandramukhi, “I drink so that I don’t feel anything”. In symbolic terms, drinking becomes for Devdas a form of anaesthesia against

perception of the 'modern' real, whether it be the jostling anarchy of the city or the stagnant conventions of the village.

Barua's cinematography renders the city and the village similarly ambivalent. Modernity for him seems related not only to a single new knowledge in the form of loneliness and alienation in the big city, but also the emergence of a critical stance against the caste-related and patriarchal ills of the 'traditional' village. Wipe transitions between scenes of the village and the city often reveal identical compositions, which suggest that similar transactions take place in both spaces. Barua avoids establishing stark visual binaries between these locales by displacing almost all of the action in the film to the private sphere, which functions as a commentary on the cloistering and overprotective tendency of the aristocratic class. Even scenes of travel are shot within enclosed spaces of trains, carts and palanquins, with a remarkable absence of point-of-view shots of the intervening space of the journey.

Barua also complicates the familiar cinematic depiction of the oppressive alienation of the 'crowd' as a quintessentially urban phenomenon – the village too can generate a similar experience. Roving, frequently high-angle aerial camera-work in scenes featuring village life conveys the constant surveillance of gossiping neighbours. An instance of this is in the scene where Devdas returns home from the city, and rushes to visit Paro, despite knowing that she, being of a lower caste, is considered by all to be an ineligible match for him. A high-angle shot frames Devdas as he approaches Paro's house, then pans to settle on Paro, who waits bashfully by a side door. The shot is presented as though from the perspective of a spying neighbor who has observed the illicit desire of the couple.

Although he reserves intimate and tight framings of 'crowded' situations for scenes of the city, Barua uses another technique to convey the multi-directional oppressive forces of the traditional village joint-family community structure. When Devdas tries to rally the support of his family members against the decision to send him to the city, a series of rapid cuts show Devdas appealing to his father, mother and older brother in turn. Each of them expresses a form of negative sanction, and their voices, magnified in ominous unison, return to haunt Devdas later, even when he is alone with Paro. The crowd-effect in the village is primarily psychological rather than physical, the result of inadequate space for privacy, personal reflection and self-determination.



The city, too, is congested. The framing in one of the scenes in the courtesan Chandramukhi's chambers suggests the paradoxical alienation of the overcrowded city. Chandramukhi is framed tightly amidst a group of her male patrons, while the next shot is of another prostitute, sitting by herself, staring out into the distance. The juxtaposition of the shots suggests that despite (or as a function of) the presence of the crowd, both women are fundamentally alone.

Barua additionally initiates a play on surface and depth with the figures of Paro and Chandramukhi through the character of Devdas. This renders the figures of the women as sites of a certain ambivalence which they then go on to articulate themselves, through forms of masquerade. Devdas, in his idealist quest for freedom from social sanction, hits Paro with a stick on her forehead on the day before her wedding, thus marking her with blood and insurrecting their own somatic symbol in place of the 'official' wedding *sindoor*. This wound is then invested with a telepathic capacity in excess of the cordial platonic relationship Devdas and Paro must maintain in public.

Devdas's interactions with Chandramukhi too raise the question of the investment of social and cultural meaning and the ossification of these in external forms that then signify social identity. When they are together in the courtesan's bedroom, Devdas destroys a photo portrait of Chandramukhi adorned in her dancing finery. Once the likeness of the courtesan is destroyed, only the woman Chandra remains. Plainly dressed, she reveals that her role as a courtesan is precisely that – a role. Moved to action, Chandra sells all her worldly possessions and retires to the village after giving up her profession, only returning to the city to rescue an inebriated Devdas from the streets, upon hearing of his descent into drink. Chandra dons fake jewellery and refurbishes her chambers to restore a semblance of their prior splendour, so that Devdas may recognise her. When he regains consciousness, Devdas says to Chandra that he had recognised her through her loving care and innate compassion, not her costume.

In its apparent form, jewellery is an ambiguous sign of both the 'fallen woman', and of respectability, social privilege, wealth, status and caste – brides can also be purchased with an adequate sum of money. Jewellery, however, also offers a liberatory capacity for masquerade. Following her rejection by Devdas's family on the basis of her lower caste, Paro is married off to a wealthy landowner, and is subsequently given jewellery to wear which will convey her newly acquired status and role of wifehood. Paro chooses to gift all of her jewellery to her husband's daughter, thus rejecting the system of exchange, valorisation of status and proper socialisation. By retaining the outward form of her pre-marital days, Paro allows herself the freedom to entertain the fantasy of her continuing illicit love for Devdas.

### **The Bollywood *Devdas***

S.L. Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002) is based on the same story as Barua's film, and prominently credits writer Saratchandra in its opening credits. However, Devdas' trajectory is significantly enlarged in geographic scope: the film opens with the hero's return from London, where he had been sent for higher education. The central story functions within a

host of melodramatic sub-plots inflected with the feudal sensibilities and genre-conventions of contemporary television soaps made famous by producers such as Ekta Kapoor. As in these interminable joint-family sagas, S.L. Bhansali's hyperbolic characterisations, climaxes and catharses relentlessly demand the willing suspension of viewer disbelief.

The central struggle in the 1936 *Devdas* has to do with negotiating the ambivalence of modern spaces and modes of being; it remains, in Barua's treatment, a negotiation that fundamentally *resists* resolution. Bhansali refigures this struggle as the oedipal conflict between a reformist 'foreign-returned' Devdas and his overbearing father, a 'brown *sahib*' character whose approval stands in for the absentee white gaze. The tragic renunciation of the Devdas character neatly sublimates the conflict by making appeal to nationalistic and patriarchal sentiments.

The aim in *Devdas* (2002) seems to be to create a spectacle of mythical 'otherness', with no pretense to accuracy of historical detail. The task of historicising social difference, which Barua undertakes through realist strategies, is generally subsumed or manipulated in Bhansali's film in service of spectacular display. In particular, the film finds it necessary to blur class differences. Bhansali expends no effort in visually differentiating the village and the city, or Devdas's high-caste house from Paro's low-caste one, or even Chandramukhi the courtesan's chambers, as discrete spaces. All of these are nearly identical in their open, courtyard-and-balconies mode of architecture and opulent, jewelled interiors. Moreover, the character of Paro is purported in Bhansali's film to be of the same dancer-caste as Chandramukhi, which provides occasion for two elaborate dance sequences, one involving Paro's mother and the other involving *both* Paro and Chandhamukhi. The presentation of these exotic spectacles for the viewer's consumption would be unthinkable outside of Bhansali's historical detour. Historical slippage seems to be widely accepted as part of the contractual complicity in participating in the experience of Bollywood. One online reviewer confesses that he enjoys *Devdas* despite (or perhaps because of) its "shamelessly commercial" display of clichés.<sup>11</sup> Contractually delivered spectacle is supplemented by the invention and proliferation of ethnic rituals and details. An instance of this is the gratuitous display of Paro painting designs on her feet as a matter of daily routine, which allows the 'swarming' of ethnic spectacle in even quotidian scenes rather than solely in scenes that specifically suggest ritual, such as a dance or celebration.

These details are of a *mythological* order of signifying. In the words of cultural theorist Rey Chow, they are not there to "mean" themselves but are present as a *second order articulation*, to speak and confess: "I am feudal India". Herein lies the reflexivity of Bollywood as a frontier. It not only produces and displays exotic ethnic primitives for Western consumption, but also allows 'natives' to become foreigners to their own tradition by affiliating their gaze with the Western gaze. This phenomenon is entirely in line with Chow's model of "autoethnography", or a practice that seizes upon a culture's 'primitives' as a means of modernising and rejuvenating the image of the culture. On the one hand, such a signifying practice serves as a means of ordering, or as Chow claims, "a new kind of organisation that is typical of modernist collecting"<sup>12</sup>. But Bollywood is also a transactional



practice of ordering oneself as a subject of *consumption*, through the act of entering into a relationship of visibility with other commodified subjects.

### Subjects of Visibility

Chow has suggested that “the state of being looked at is not only built into the way non-Western cultures are viewed by Western ones; more significantly it is part of the active manner in which such cultures represent – ethnographise – themselves”. Several theorists have written about representation and subjectivity in Indian cinema in terms of *darsana*, an alternative mode of looking and being looked at derived from the power exercised by the image of deities in Hindu religious culture. Film studies scholar Ravi Vasudevan writes, “[...] in this practice, the devotee is permitted to behold the image of the deity, and is privileged and benefited by this permission, in contrast to a concept of looking that assigns power to the beholder by reducing the image to an object of the look”. In Vasudevan’s reading of Bimal Roy’s *Devdas* (1955), the film mobilises Paro’s subjectivity by representing her point of view, but simultaneously restricts Paro’s gaze to Devdas’ feet, framed in a doorway which functions as the threshold of a symbolic sanctum. Thus the practice of *darsana* is deployed cinematically to constrain the field of the female look by focusing the beloved within a discourse of divinity.<sup>13</sup>

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault develops the visual analogy of panopticism to describe the mechanics of modern power relations: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play simultaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes a principle of his own subjection”<sup>14</sup>. In other words, in becoming a subject who ‘looks’ or acts, one always already ‘agrees’ to become a subject who is ‘looked at’ or is acted *upon*. The suggestion is that the state of existence within a field of visibility is both fundamentally unavoidable and ambivalent – it is the modern condition of being.

The scene in Barua’s film where Devdas first visits the courtesan Chandramukhi’s dancehall demonstrates this conundrum of the modern subject rather remarkably. Devdas

reluctantly approaches the hall with his friend Chunilal, who has prevailed upon him to attend. Immediately, Barua cuts to the space they are about to enter, and gives us a detailed breakdown of the interior of the dance hall. The circular organisation of 'looks' within the space is quite extraordinary. A courtesan dances in the centre of the room. In front of the dancer and to her sides are patrons seated at various distances from her, who look at the dancer, and across the room at each other. Behind the dancer, seated in a semi-circular arc on a mattress are Chandramukhi and the musicians, who look alternately at each other, the dancer and the patrons. The dancer, who twirls around in circles as she dances, is at the perfect vantage point for seeing everyone seated around her in the room in rapid alternation, including herself – there is a single mirror on the wall behind the mattress. Moreover, the dancer is not the only subject presenting a literal performance for view – one of the male patrons has borrowed a courtesan's veil, and mimics the movements of the dancer in an ambiguous, unsettling, shadow performance.

Our view into the scene as spectators seems to be aligned with that of one of the patrons, and thus with a position that allows us to check our own position in the mirror. When Devdas' entrance interrupts the dance, Barua pans from the dancer to the hero, who has stopped short by the door, staring at the scene before him. Next come a series of remarkable reverse-shots, where the dancer, Chandramukhi, the musicians and each of the patrons meet Devdas' gaze in turn. We cut back to Devdas, who stares straight ahead, presumably also seeing himself in the mirror, establishing in that moment – even as he sanctimoniously asks his friend Chuni why he *has been brought* to such a godforsaken place – that his participation in this urban activity, like the other participants in the room, cannot but be one of *voluntary* subjection. Without having to resort to a point-of-view shot, Barua deftly aligns the spectator in this crucial moment with Devdas, who, in becoming a subject of visibility, necessarily inscribes in himself the constitutive ambivalence of the modern subject.

Consider the equivalent scene of Devdas' return in the Bollywood version. Prior to this scene, Devdas is spoken about very much in terms of the *darsanic*. In his home, Devdas' mother, sister-in-law and grandmother excitedly discuss who will be the first to behold the vision of Devdas's form, ever more god-like in his newly acquired 'England-returned' status.



It is a topic of some controversy that Devdas goes first to see Paro – that she will be the first to ‘look’ upon him. However, in this much-awaited sequence of the *darsana* of Devdas, the setting up of the hero as *darsanic* is in fact an excuse for displacing the viewer’s gaze onto the body of Paro, the ‘exquisite primitive’. The sound of Devdas’ voice, announcing his presence, gives Paro occasion to run up several flights of stairs and through various corridors of her enormous parental home, to bashfully defer the moment of taking *darsana* of Devdas and reciprocally offer herself for his and the spectator’s gaze. The structure of this mansion itself, which is constructed almost entirely of stained-glass windows, doors and balconies, is extraordinarily similar to the physical structure of the Foucauldian panopticon. Bedrooms open onto multiple levels of balconies, which in turn look out upon a central ‘viewing’ space. During Paro’s marathon, which takes up more than a full minute of screen time, not only does the audience have plenty of time to take in the exotic opulence of the ‘pre-modern’ panoptic mansion, but Paro too has innumerable opportunities to present herself for view – and to look at her reflection in multiple panes of glass in the seemingly unending series of doors that she runs through and windows that she flings open in her euphoric trajectory. At any one of these moments, we not only literally see Paro, located in the focal point of multiple adjacent mirrors, but also *ourselves*, poised, with the figure of Paro, in an infinite series of reflections. Thus, *Devdas* (2002) functions as a highly sophisticated reflexive *and* refractive matrix for negotiating how to dynamically position oneself as a subject of global visibility – not only how to look and be looked at, but also how to signify and to offer oneself for re-signification; how to consume, and to locate oneself as a commodity.

### Towards a Prismatic Model

Barua’s *Devdas* (1936) might have operated as a form of vernacular modernism in terms of bringing into “optical consciousness” hitherto unperceived modes of sensory perception, for the organisation of oneself in relation to the modern context. However, in today’s postmodern, globalised contexts of consumption, Bhansali’s *Devdas* (2002) operates, we might say, as a vernacular *post* modernism. As a frontier of interaction, Bollywood provides a reflexive horizon for adapting technologically transformed perceptions to the task of positioning oneself dynamically in relation to constantly changing spaces and modes of work. More importantly, it serves as a *refractive* prism for realising and propelling into motion one’s own dynamic, if ambivalent, potential as a consumer *and* as a commodity. As a microcosm of the practice of Bollywood, a film such as *Devdas* (2002) creates its own economy and means of proliferation. ‘Vernacular postmodernism’ is a signifying practice aligned to the exigencies of postmodernity; like capitalism, it must in fact *terraform*, seeking to simultaneously resonate everywhere simply in order to exist at all.

## Notes

1. Blogger website: 'Subtitle your own Bollywood movie'.  
<http://www.populationstatistic.com/archives/2006/02/04/subtitle-your-own-bollywood-movie/>  
Subtitling website: Bombay TV. <http://www.grapheine.com/bombaytv/index.php?lang=uk>
2. Madhava Prasad. "This Thing Called Bollywood". In *Seminar Web Edition* No. 525 (May 2003).  
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8. See P.K. Nair, "The Devdas Syndrome in Indian Cinema", in *Cinemaya* No. 56-57, pp. 83-91 (2002); and Maithili Rao, "An Outmoded Archetype?" in *Cinema in India*, pp. 16-23 (April-June 2002).
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