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Is There an Indian Way of Filmmaking?

Philip Lutgendorf

Poet and polymath A. K. Ramanujan once wrote a serious article that he playfully titled, “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?” It began by querying its own question, for Ramanujan was aware of the risk of essentialism (and its past deployment by Orientalists, Marxists, nationalists, and so on) when approaching a vast region of perhaps greater ethnic and linguistic diversity than Europe.¹ Yet as a trained linguist and folklorist, he was indeed interested in the recurring patterns and themes that lend a distinctive flavor to South Asian culture—a flavor that may be especially recognizable to an outsider, or to an insider who steps out. That Indian popular films likewise have a definite “flavor” is generally recognized (and one indigenous descriptor of them is indeed as *masālā* or “spicy”), even by Anglo-Americans who encounter them while surfing cable TV channels—and not simply because the actors happen to be Indian. The films look, sound, and feel different in important ways, and a kind of cinematic culture shock may accompany a first prolonged exposure. An American film scholar, after viewing his first “*masālā* blockbuster,” remarked to me that the various cinemas he had studied—American, French, Japanese, African—all seemed to play by a similar set of aesthetic rules, “but this is a different universe.” Experienced viewers are familiar with the sometimes negative responses of neophyte visitors to this universe: the complaint that its films “all look the same,” are mind-numbingly long, have incoherent plots and raucous music, belong to no known genre but appear to be a mish-mash of several, and are naive and crude imitations of “real” (that is, Hollywood) movies, and so on—all, by the way, complaints that are regularly voiced by some Indians as well, particularly by critics writing in English. They also know that millions of people, including vast audiences outside the subcontinent, apparently understand and love the “difference” of these films.

Ramanujan published his article in the anthology *India Through Hindu Categories* (Marriott 1990), which was part of a broad if sporadic effort within the Euro-American academy, spurred by post-World War II interest in “area studies,” to understand other cultures in their own terms and to acknowledge the assumptions rooted in Western intellectual tradition that had unconsciously biased previous

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inquiries. For South Asia, the standard narratives of history, religion, and literature had largely emerged from the colonial-era collaboration of British and Indian elites; given the asymmetry of power in this collaboration, the expectations of the former often influenced the information they received from the latter, which in turn shaped the explanatory narratives they crafted and then (through the colonial knowledge economy) exported back to their native subjects. Despite recent efforts to question or deconstruct the received narratives of “Hinduism” (as a monolithic “religion”; see Dalmia and Stietencron 1995), “caste” (as a rigid “system” and distinctively Indian form of social organization; see Dirks 2001), and even language (in the case of Hindi and Urdu, as reified and religion-specific; see King 1994; Rai 2001), scholars still remain far from the goal (to cite the title of another recent study) of “Provincializing Europe”—turning the lens back on the ostensibly all-seeing eye of Euro-American intellectual hegemony (D. Chakrabarty 2000). In film studies, a longreigning Copernican discourse on “cinema” in general (that is, American and, to a lesser extent, European), occasionally digressed to consider “national cinemas” as represented by a few auteurs. India was associated with the Bengali “art films” of Satyajit Ray, with an occasional bemused reference to “the lip-synched Bollywood musical” (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2005: 341; cf. Corrigan and White 2004: 375)—a designation that dismisses (by conservative estimate) more than 30,000 feature films produced since the advent of sound in 1931. That this enormous and influential body of popular art is now beginning to receive scholarly notice suggests the need for, at least, systemic realignment (as when a big new planet swims into our ken); a more audacious suggestion is that its “different universe” might make possible an Einsteinian paradigm-shift by introducing new ways of thinking about the space-time of cinematic narrative.

That is, of course, if the universe is truly “different.” Assertions of the distinctive “Indianness” of Indian popular cinema—or its lack—have emerged from a variety of scholarly approaches,² namely:

(1) Cultural-historical: This traces the distinct features of Indian cinema to older styles of oral and theatrical performance, some of which survive into modern times. A fairly standard genealogy cites the ancient epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, classical Sanskrit drama, regional folk theaters of the medieval-to-modern period, and the Parsi theater of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for example, Dissanayake and Sahai 1992: 9–17; Lutze 1985; Mishra 1985, 2002: 4–15, 39–45).³

(2) Technological: Here the distinctive features of Indian cinema are traced to the advent of technologies of image reproduction during the second half of the nineteenth century, resulting in the rapid evolution and dissemination of a common visual code for theatrical staging, poster art, cinema, comic books, advertising, and so on (Jain 2007; Pinney 1999; Rajadhyaksha 1987; Ramaswamy 2003). A related approach, confined to cinema itself, analyzes camerawork and sound, noting Indian filmmakers’ rejection of the “invisible style” and “centering” principle of classic Hollywood in favor of an aesthetic of “frontality” (especially in early “mythologicals”), “flashy” camerawork, and a consciously artificial style, further heightened

by the use of nonsynch sound and “playback” singing (for example, Dissanayake and Sahai 1992: 19–20; Manuel 1993: 37–59; Vasudevan 2000b: 105).

(3) Psychological/Mythic : This approach reads popular films as “contemporary myths which, through the vehicle of fantasy and the process of identification, temporarily heal for their audience the principal stresses arising out of Indian family relationships” (Kakar 1983: 97). The favored approach is psychoanalytic (for example, Kakar 1989: 25–41), although there has been one ambitious attempt to use a “mythological” film to modify a basic Freudian paradigm with respect to Indian culture (Kurtz 1992).

(4) Political-economic : This approach, drawing on the Marxist-influenced critical social theory of the Frankfurt school, attributes the distinctive features of Indian popular cinema to the material and sociopolitical conditions of twentieth-century India and of the film industry itself and argues that the films encode an ideology that “subsumes” a modernist agenda of egalitarianism, individualism, and radical social change within a feudal and nonegalitarian status quo (for example, Kazmi 1999; Prasad 1998). Other similarly ambitious surveys see popular films as essentially allegorizing the political history of the nation-state (for example, S, Chakravarty 1993; Virdi 2003).

These approaches are neither exhaustive nor incompatible; many scholars combine two or more. It is fairly common to invoke the first by way of sketching a cultural background and then to proceed to one or more of the others, perhaps analyzing a single film in their terms (for example, Dissanayake and Sahai 1992). At times, however, there is an element of antagonism between proponents of the first and fourth approaches. On the one hand, one encounters grandiose claims that the classical tradition and especially the two Sanskrit epics constitute “the great code” of popular filmmaking and that “any theoretical critique of Bombay Cinema must begin with a systematic analysis of the grand Indian metatext and ‘founder of (Indian) discursivity,’ namely the...[*Mahābhārata/Rāmāyaṇa*]” (Mishra 1985: 145). This is a claim that is sometimes made by filmmakers themselves, as when Mumbai director Dharmesh Darshan tells an interviewer, “In India, our stories depend on the *Ramayan*—all our stories are somewhere connected to this holy book” (Kabir 2001: 93; see also Thomas 1995: 182n35). On the other hand, a Marxist scholar criticizes “anthropologists and Indologists or others employing the tools of these disciplines” for their tendency “to read popular cinema as evidence of the unbroken continuity of Indian culture and its tenacity in the face of the assault of modernity” (Prasad 1998: 15). He warns that such “eternalist proclamations...while claiming to reveal the truth about Indian cinema, actually contribute to the maintenance of an Indological myth: the myth of the mythically minded Indian” (Prasad 1998: 17).

In what follows I use my training as a folklorist and student of oral performance and popular narrative traditions to revisit the first approach cited above, but I do so mindful of the criticisms just offered. I have no wish to contribute to what Kazmi calls “the fetishisation of tradition” (1999: 62), to suggest that there is an unchanging “essence” of Indian performance, or to imply that some genetic inheri-

tance predisposes South Asians to relish three-hour spectacles of music, dance, and high emotion. Such tastes reflect nurture, not nature, and they, and the films that cater to them, are influenced by diverse forces that also change over time. The claim that popular films are all based on epic archetypes is demonstrably groundless, as is the hyperbolic (and insulting) generalization that they reflect folk traditions “that impinge on the Indian’s psyche and never allow him to escape from the psychological parameters of being an Indian villager” (Saari 1985: 16)—an assessment that reduces a population of over one billion (increasing numbers of whom now live in urban areas) to (male) embodiments of an inescapably rustic “Indian psyche.” But the Marxist reduction is scarcely more satisfying: M. Madhava Prasad’s argument (1998: 64–72) for the decades-long dominance of a single ideological master narrative hinges on a few roughly sketched plot outlines, omits questions of reception, and ignores the films’ poetic and musical component altogether.

The practices and conventions that I will be discussing are observably pervasive of the Indian cultural environment, alluded to in verbal idioms, body language, and ubiquitous iconography. Hence they can be relearned by successive generations, though their precise forms at a given moment are of course subject to historical contingency and outside influence. Indeed, the “hybridity” of Indian popular cinema is another of its proverbial features: its pastiche and parody of foreign forms and practices and its frequent borrowing of camera shots, plot ideas, and musical styles. Although every cinema borrows, the specific forms that borrowing assumes in the postcolonial South Asian context and the economic and cultural forces that influence it are indeed deserving of study. Here I will only propose that the visual and musical hybridity of this cinema has itself become, like other ingredients in its overall *masālā* mix, one of its distinctively “Indian” features—identifying it as, in Anil Saari’s words, “an eclectic, assimilative, imitative, and plagiaristic creature that is constantly rebelling against its influences” (1985: 16).

Rosie Thomas has observed that “films are in no sense a simple reflection of the wider society, but are produced by an apparatus that has its own momentum and logic” (1995: 179). She thus underscores the power of cinematic conventions, whatever their genealogy, to rapidly become self-perpetuating, serving to educate both audiences and producers in the expectation of what a film ought to be. Since the makers of commercial films constantly strive to fulfill audience expectations, it may well be true that the single biggest influence on Indian popular cinema has long been Indian popular cinema. Yet it is equally clear that the distinctive conventions of this artform, which have tenaciously resisted the influence of Western cinemas, did not arise in a cultural vacuum.

In the sections that follow, my aim, first of all, is to give novice students of Indian popular cinema an acquaintance with some of the terms, texts, and narrative genres that are regularly cited in studies of its cultural origins, along with references to relevant primary and secondary sources. In addition, I seek to correct certain imbalances and omissions in the standard genealogical narrative as outlined earlier, by presenting material (for example, on the Indo-Islamic romance tradition) that has

been omitted by other scholars. Finally, I aim to suggest ways in which selected resources drawn from the Indian cultural heritage might be applied not only to the study of Indian cinema (as an exotic “other” to Western cinemas) but more broadly to the study of cinema in general.

Seeing

Academic scholarship took more than half a century to begin to look at cinematic “looking,” and indeed at cinema itself as a subject of serious inquiry. The delay may have reflected not merely the inertia of disciplines, but a more ingrained prejudice toward text over image traceable at least to the Reformation and Enlightenment. The subsequent proliferation of ever more sophisticated technologies for the reproduction of images was experienced by some scholars as a worrisome onslaught on the cerebral realm of verbal discourse, which may explain why film studies as a discipline initially arose as an offshoot of literary criticism, accommodating film as another form of “text.” As Prasad points out, the development of critical vocabulary for analyzing the visual aspect of film (such as the concepts of “male gaze” and “scopophilia”; for example, Mulvey 1975) has tended to assume an essentially “realist” cinema whose spectator “occupies an isolated, individualized position of voyeurism coupled with an anchoring identification with a figure in the narrative” (Prasad 1998: 74)—an assumption that is problematic when applied to Indian commercial films. A yet more holistic appreciation of the cinematic experience remains a challenging agenda, and sound and music continue to be relatively neglected in scholarship. As I note shortly, this intellectual genealogy may be contrasted to an Indian synaesthetic discourse, dating back some fifteen centuries, which is based squarely on visual and aural performance.

Vision and sound already interact in the hymns of the *Rg Veda*, attributed to poets known both as “singers” (*kavi*) and “seers” (*ṛṣi*), who were credited with the ability to “see” the gods as well as the “sound-formulas” (*mantra*) of the hymns, suggesting a blurring of the senses in mystical experience. *Ṛṣi*, conventionally translated “sage,” comes from the Sanskrit verb root *drś*, which has a double meaning also found in comparable verbs used in modern Indian languages (for example, the Hindi verb *dekhnā*): it means both “to see” and “to look at.” Indeed, “seeing” was (and continues to be) understood as a tangible encounter in which sight reaches out to “touch” objects and “take” them back into the seer (hence *dekhnā* is normally compounded with *lenā*, “to take,” also used for verbs of ingestion). Likewise derived from *drś* is the noun *darśana*, “seeing, looking at,” a term that assumed great importance following the decline of the Vedic sacrificial cult and the rise, during the first millennium of the Common Era, of the worship of gods embodied in tangible images.

The iconic prolixity of Hinduism is a commonplace. There are said to be “three hundred thirty million gods,” and their representations typically bristle with supernumerary heads, arms, and weapons. A shared and striking feature of the deities

is their eyes, often huge and elongated, which gaze directly at the viewer. The theovisual spectacle of the Hindu pantheon was, however, “hard to see” for most European observers prior to the twentieth century, and they dismissed it either as “demonic” or as a distorted simulacrum of the “realist” aesthetic of Greco-Roman civilization (Mitter 1977)—the latter assessment prefiguring one common Western response to the visual code of Indian popular films. When Hindu images are crafted, their painted or inlaid eyes are customarily added last and then ritually “opened,” establishing the deity within the icon and making him or her available for the primary act of worship, which is “seeing/looking” (*darśana*; Hindi *darśan*). In Indian English, people go to temples “to take *darśan*”; Hindi favors “to do *darśan*” (*darśan karnā*)—both idioms imply a willful and tangible act. “Darśanic” contact invites the exchange of substance through the eyes, which are not simply “windows of the soul,” but portals to a self that is conceived as relatively less autonomous and bounded and more psychically permeable than in Western understandings (F. Smith 2006). *Darśan* may also refer to the auspicious sight of powerful places and persons; holy people and kings (and politicians and filmstars) “give *darśan*” to those who approach them.

The derivatives of Sanskrit *drś* do not exhaust the vocabulary of seeing in South Asia. The word “*nazar*” (“look” or “glance”), imported from Arabic and Persian, has similar connotations of tangible exchange and is common both in everyday speech (where it figures in a large number of idioms) as well as in Indo-Islamic religious discourse. It is applied to the eye contact of lovers, especially the first sight that arouses passion, and also to the benign gaze of *Šūfī* masters, which watches over and protects their disciples. A similar range of meanings is conveyed by idioms using the Persian-derived *nigāh*, which translates as “look” or “glance,” yet connotes a more potent contact than these English words. It also connotes, in the context of a culture that idealized (and sometimes practiced) the veiling of respectable women, an illicit glimpse that can give rise to intense “love at first sight” that is disruptive of social and familial hierarchy. Another potentially dangerous side of sight—when negative feelings or forces exit or enter through the eyes—is also invoked through idioms of a “black” or “evil” gaze (*kālī nazar*, *burī nazar*) from which one seeks protection. Such looks are associated with powerful and proscribed desires—especially lust, envy, or covetousness.

The ideology and practice of *darśan/nazar* has contributed to a cinematic aesthetic of “frontality,” especially in early mythological films that recapitulated the conventions of poster illustration: the deity/actor, often centrally framed within a static tableau, was positioned to invite sustained eye contact with the viewer (A. Kapur 1993: 92; G. Kapur 1987: 80). It likewise contributes to the more ubiquitous fetish, across all cinematic genres and periods, for eyes and glances, especially in scenes between lovers,⁴ as well as the great emphasis (also notable in Indian dance, folk theater, and miniature painting) on the eyes as communicators of emotion (for example, the popular 1970s and 1980s technique of repeated facial zoom shots, locking on the eyes, during moments of high emotion). But there is more to

cinematic “seeing” than this, since *darśan* is a “gaze” that is *returned*. In a crowded Hindu temple, one can observe worshipers positioning themselves so that their eyes have a clear line of contact with those of the god. Their explanations emphasize that they do not merely want to *see* the deity, but to *be seen by him or her* so that the deity’s powerful and unwavering gaze may *enter into* them. I have sometimes translated *darśan* as “visual communion,” but “visual dialog” or “visual intercourse” might be better, if one tones down the latter phrase’s sexual connotation—without removing it entirely. But whereas a deity’s act of seeing is normally only vicariously sensed by his or her seer, the invention of the motion picture camera and of the shot-reverse shot convention enabled the film viewer for the first time to assume, so to speak, *both* positions in the *darśanic* act. This is evident in surviving footage from pioneer filmmaker D. G. Phalke’s *Kaliya Mardan* (The Slaying of Serpent Kaliya, 1919), in which a posterlike frontal tableau of the child Kṛṣṇa (played by Phalke’s daughter Mandakini) dancing on a subdued serpent yields to a Kṛṣṇa-eye-view of the assembled crowd of worshipers, gazing at “him” in reverent awe. This technique became a commonplace in mythological films (for a sustained example, see the first song sequence in *Jai Santoshi Maa*, 1975), but its ubiquity should not obscure its religious significance. The camera’s invitation to gaze through the deity’s (or star’s) eyes heightens the experience of the reciprocity of *darśan*, closing an experiential loop to evoke (in a characteristically Hindu move) an underlying unity (Lutgendorf 2002: 28).

Long overlooked even by scholars of Hindu religious traditions, the everyday concept of *darśan* (for which the key text is Diana Eck’s 1981 study) has recently come to be invoked in scholarship on Indian cinema (Prasad 1998: 74–78; Vasudevan 2000a: 139–47, 2000b: 119–20n52). Prasad’s extended discussion deserves comment. Noting the absence of studies of “the politics of *darsana*,” he offers one in the context of his analysis of mainstream Hindi films of the 1950s and 1960s. He characterizes these generically as variants on a “feudal family romance,” which he defines as “typically a tale of love and adventure, in which a high-born figure, usually a prince, underwent trials that tested his courage and at the end of which he would return to inherit the father’s position and to marry” (Prasad 1998: 30). Prasad views this as a regressive narrative form, which, among other things, precludes “affirmation of new sexual and social relations based on individualism” (1998: 67). In his assessment, *darśan* itself is another vestige of “feudal” values: “a hierarchical despotic public spectacle in which the political subjects witness and legitimize the splendor of the ruling class” (Prasad 1998: 78). Extending this interpretation to Hindu worship, Prasad emphasizes the necessity of a mediating Brāhmaṇa priest who controls the experience for the worshiper and reinforces the latter’s abject position (for example, “the devotee’s muteness is a requirement of the entire process”); identification with the object of “the *darsanic* gaze” is impossible, he claims, except on a “symbolic” level (1998: 75–76).⁵

Prasad’s remarks suggest the triumph of ideology over observation; they contradict the diurnal realities of Hindu practice and the experiences described by

worshippers themselves. *Darśan* emphatically does not require priestly mediation, and although prosperous temples usually employ Brāhmaṇas who tend to the needs of deities and prepare them for public viewing, one may easily observe how marginal such men are to the act of *darśan*; by and large, worshippers treat them as petty servant-bureaucrats.⁶ Further, Hindu devotees are seldom “mute” during *darśan*; they pray, sing, petition, and express highly individual behavior; uniform mass worship, such as prevails in a Christian service (or in choreographed temple scenes in Indian films) is strikingly absent in real temples. Worshippers also make their needs (for flowers, sweets, and other tangible expressions of *prasād* or “grace”) known to priests.⁷ These responses also go on in the numerous temples and shrines—including those found in countless households—in which there is never a priest present. Further, Prasad’s stress on merely “symbolic identification” suggests his assumption that Western notions of absolute transcendence, of God as the “wholly other” to the human, apply to Hindu deities. But anyone who takes the trouble to read a Purāṇa, or a devotional chapbook, or to watch a “mythological” film ought to feel uneasy with this assumption. Hindu deities are emphatically “like us” in many ways; they share human emotions, desires, and needs. This is so partly because they are encountered and intensively “seen” through a reciprocal transaction that is potentially empowering to the human participant.

A sensitivity to the interactive nature of *darśan* might provide a different way of thinking about the visual experience of film. If cinematic “realism” offers an essentially voyeuristic peep into, in Christian Metz’s (1986) words, “a world that is seen without giving itself to be seen” (cited in Prasad 1998: 72), the self-conscious style of the Indian popular film provides what Prasad rightly calls “a representation that gives itself to be seen” (1998: 73). This indeed parallels what Hindu deities do on the stages of their shrine-theaters, but their viewers’ response is neither stupefied nor mute. Unlike the “gaze” of Western film theory, *darśan* is a two-way street; a visual interaction between players who, though not equal, are certainly both in the same theater of activity and capable of influencing each other, especially in the vital realm of emotion.

Hearing

Discussions of the conventions of Indian popular cinema in terms of those of premodern performance genres often invoke ancient Sanskrit drama and its authoritative treatise, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, yet they seldom offer detailed information about this text. This is unfortunate, since the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a key moment in the Indian tradition of thinking about performance, and its relevance for film theory potentially goes beyond the stylistic similarities that link the theater it describes with the latest Hindi or Tamil melodrama.⁸ A treatise in thirty-six chapters, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* purports to describe the origin and development of drama as well as to treat comprehensively of virtually every aspect of the composition and staging of plays.⁹ Although the text at one point concedes the possibility of a theatrical style based on

naturalistic imitation of human behavior (which it terms *lokadharmī* or “according to the way of the world”—that is, “realistic”), it disposes of this in a mere two verses (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 14.62–63; Rangacharya 1996: 115) and instead devotes itself to what it terms the “theatrical” or “artificial” style (*nāṭyadharmī*), though *nāṭya* (literally, “to be danced”) should not be translated generically as “theater.” Rather, it refers to an operatic dance-drama characterized by an alternation between spoken and sung passages and in which “speech is artificial and exaggerated, actions unusually emotional, gestures graceful” (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 14.64–65; Rangacharya 1996: 115).

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* devotes chapters to the design of stages and to props, costumes, and makeup, but the bulk of the text is preoccupied with the expression of emotion through the body via speech, music, and gesture. Its obsessively tidy classifications (about which I shall say more) include descriptions of thirty-six different “looks” (to which it gives primacy in emotional expression; *Nāṭyaśāstra* 14.22–33; Rangacharya 1996: 113), twenty-four facial expressions, an equal number of hand gestures, and thirty-two foot movements used in dance and mime (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 8–11; Rangacharya 1996: 80–96). Two lengthy chapters are devoted to poetic meters, ornaments, and techniques, and two more, on theatrical speech, prescribe the use of several languages and dialects in accordance with the social status or geographical origin of characters (suggesting this drama’s aim to encompass a stratified and multilingual society, and making the label “Sanskrit drama” an oversimplification). Six chapters, including three of the longest in the text, are devoted to musical performance, and the single longest deals with songs, which are to be interspersed throughout a play and performed by an ensemble located at one side of the stage. The fact that drama itself is sometimes defined synaesthetically as “visible poetry” (*dr̥śya kāvya*; Rangacharya 1996: 356) suggests the aptness of the standard Indian-English word for the visuals in a modern filmsong sequence, which are identified as the “picturization” of the music and lyrics.

This format of alternately spoken and sung performance, which gave great emphasis to poetic and musical expression of emotion, survived the demise of Sanskrit drama toward the end of the first millennium CE and became characteristic of a range of regional folk dramatic forms using vernacular languages; it was transferred to the urban proscenium stage by the (mainly Hindi/Urdu language) “Parsi theatre” troupes of the nineteenth century. It also became, after the introduction of film sound to India in 1931, the standard format for commercial cinema. Just as, in Sanskrit and most regional languages, there was no word for “play” that did not imply “music-and-dance drama,” so Indian-English “film” normally means one incorporating songs and dances, and there has never been a separate genre category of “musical” in the Hollywood sense. The specialized skills of lyricists and composers are highly valued within the industry and among its fans, and their names are likely to appear on posters and billboards as a way of promoting a film (stars’ names seldom appear, since their faces instantly identify them). Since the 1970s, dialog writers have sometimes received equally high billing, and the scripts of many popular films have been published in booklet or audiocassette form.

The rhetorical and musical dimensions of Indian popular cinema, like those of older genres of performance, present a challenge to English-language viewers. Although the hybrid melodies, instrumentation, and rhythms of film songs may be appreciated as music, the poetry of their lyrics is lost—even when (as is unfortunately not always the case) song sequences are subtitled on commercial DVD releases. Dialog subtitles too mostly fail to convey the clever colloquial patois, dramatic innuendo, wordplay, double entendre, and intertextual referencing that abounds in these films and that makes “*filmī* dialog” a performance genre unto itself—an artificial but admired speech register that is jokingly referred to in such Hindi expressions as “*filmī dāylog mārṇā*” (to speak in an exaggeratedly emotional manner). To a far greater extent than is the case in America, the remembered language of popular films—phrases from dialog and lyrics of songs—circulate in everyday speech together with other bodies of oral tradition (such as aphoristic couplets from medieval poet-saints like Kabīr and Mīrābāī) and contribute to a range of casual “performances”—as when one speaker cites part of a line of film dialog and another completes it. In the party game *antākṣarī* (“game of the last syllable”), players or teams compete to demonstrate their memory of song lyrics, with the last syllable of a remembered song-line yielding the first syllable of one to be recalled by the next contestant.¹⁰ Such practices reflect not simply the extent (distressing to some cultural critics) to which film language pervades modern Indian life; they also point to the continuing high valuation of oral rhetorical performance in general—including secular speeches, religious sermons (themselves often accompanied by music), and poetic recitations that sometimes attract stadium-filling crowds.

It is ironic to have to remind a Western critical audience—which is slowly becoming comfortable with the privileging of image over text and which lives in a culture in which poetry is in retreat, political discourse reduced to soundbites, the art of rhetoric suspect, and the manipulation of emotion and desire increasingly achieved through visual content alone—of the artistic weight that, in successful Indian films, is carried by dialogs structured as rhetorical setpieces and by songs that are sometimes penned by renowned poets. Given their importance to audiences, the rhetorical and musical aspects of popular films have been grossly neglected in scholarly analysis—dismissed as insignificant relics of earlier performance genres (Prasad 1998: 111, 136) or as mere “spectacle” randomly inserted into the cinematic narrative (Dissanayake and Sahai 1992: 18). Other scholars, however, have proposed that the “message” of an Indian film is hardly confined to its plotline (especially given the characteristically “loose” form of the latter, to be discussed shortly) and that the work of song, dance, and dialog is at times precisely to fissure the surface ideology of a film, by allowing the expression of suppressed desires and subjectivities (Booth 2000: 126; Mishra 2002: 161–65; Vasudevan 2000b: 117).

Incidentally, the intellectual critique of “song and dance” in Indian dramatic performance is not new. For all its discussion of songs, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* cautions against excessive use of them (Rangacharya 1996: 42), and at one point the sages, to whom the treatise is being narrated by the legendary author Bharata, ask him why it

is necessary, after all, to have dance in a *nāṭya*, adding “How can dance convey a message?” Bharata responds by observing that, although dance has no “meaning,” it is invariably used in drama because “it creates beauty.” He then adds pragmatically (and this seems to clinch the matter), “Generally, people like dance. It is also considered to be auspicious....It is also a diversion” (Rangacharya 1996: 36).

Tasting

One of the most influential and intriguing components of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is its aesthetic theory, elucidated mainly in chapters six and seven. These serve as locus classicus for the concepts of *bhāva* (“emotion, mood”) and *rasa* (“juice, flavor, essence”) which were further developed by later writers on drama and poetry and indeed by theologians and metaphysicians—for aesthetic pleasure came to be regarded as on a continuum with or as a means to transcendent bliss (*ānanda*). The seeds of this understanding are already present in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*’s own frame story (to be discussed below) which identifies theater as a “fifth Veda” synthesizing and in a sense superceding the traditional four bodies of revealed knowledge.

Like the Greek philosophers, ancient Indian thinkers were interested in why people enjoy theater and in what they “get” from it; specifically, in why they derive pleasure from seeing things on stage that would not be pleasurable in everyday life. Whereas Aristotle posited *katharsis*, a purgation or cleansing, the authors of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and their successors favored a more complex explanation. In their view, primary and individualized human emotions (*bhāva*) generated by the multifarious experiences of life are transmuted, through their representation by actors in a dramatic spectacle, into universalized emotional “flavors” (*rasa*) that may be savored by audience members at the safe remove that theater provides (Masson and Patwardhan 1970, 1: 24). The complexity of the theory arises in part from the elucidation of the primary emotions, which comprise love, mirth, anger, pity, heroic vigor, wonder, disgust, and terror—these eight become sixteen, since each *bhāva* induces a corresponding *rasa*, which then proliferate geometrically into further subcategories (for example, *Nāṭyaśāstra* 7.6–8; Rangacharya 1996: 65). What is most notable for my purpose is the assumption that, although a given performance will have a predominant *rasa* (thus a farce will be dominated by *hāsya rasa*, or the comic flavor, and a martial saga by *vīrya rasa*, or the heroic), it is expected to offer a range of others as well. The imagery used is somatic and in fact gustatory, locating aesthetic pleasure in the body as much as in the mind; thus the text asserts that a drama’s *rasa* may be likened to the taste produced “when various condiments and sauces and herbs and other materials are mixed” (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 6.31–33; Rangacharya 1996: 55). Further, it is understood that *rasas* are fleeting and may be enjoyed serially; a successful performance is thus akin to a well-designed banquet or smorgasbord, serving up *rasa* after *rasa* for spectators to savor.¹¹

Although modern filmgoers seldom specialize in classical aesthetic theory, the vocabulary of *bhāva* and *rasa* remains in use in Indian vernaculars, and the broad

cultural consensus is that a satisfying cinematic entertainment ought to generate a succession of sharply delineated emotional moods. Whereas Western viewers are sometimes distressed by what seems to them a *mélange* of genres (comedy, action-adventure, romance, and so on) and too-abrupt transitions in mood (a tragic scene yielding to a comic one, and then to a romantic song set in a fantasied landscape), Indian audiences take such shifts in their stride and may even complain if a film does not deliver the anticipated range of emotions (though they also at times complain of pointlessness in film sequences if the moods evoked do not in some sense cohere into a satisfying whole).¹² Performance theorist Richard Schechner (2001) has observed that whereas Western theater tends to be “plot-driven,” Indian theater is more typically “*rasa*-driven,” and has suggested that a familiarity with (what he terms) “*rasa*aesthetics”—a more somatically based understanding of the effect of performed emotions on the spectator—could enlarge the conceptual vocabulary of Western critical theory (cf. Schechner 1985: 136–42).¹³

A final aspect of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* deserves mention: its frame narrative, which situates the origin of drama within the classical Hindu time-cycle of four ages (*yugas*) that become successively debased and enervated. In the first chapter of the treatise, the gods complain to Brahmā that in the current Kali Yuga (the fourth and darkest age), people no longer understand the Vedas; moreover, men of the lowest class (*Śūdras*) and women are forbidden even to hear them. Hence there is a need for “something which would not only teach us but be pleasing both to eyes and ears” (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 1.10–12; Rangacharya 1996: 1). Brahmā obliges by distilling the essence of the four Vedas into a fifth, which he terms the *Nāṭya Veda* and which is to be accessible to all ranks of society. He then teaches it to the sage Bharata who in turn transmits it to his hundred sons; assisted by heavenly courtesans (*apsaras*), they perform the first play on a celestial stage (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 1.14–105; Rangacharya 1996: 1–5). This narrative, interrupted by thirty-four chapters on theatrical technique and poetic theory, resumes in the final chapter when the sages ask Bharata how drama was brought down from heaven to earth. He replies that, in time, his actor-sons became arrogant and began performing only satires, in which they “encouraged rustic manners” and even lampooned sages. The latter became angry and cursed the actors to be born on earth in a debased condition: “You will become mere *Śūdras*... and those to be born in your line will be impure. And your posterity will be dancers who will worship others, along with their wives and children” (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 36.40–41; Ghosh 1961: 233). When his disgraced sons threaten suicide, Bharata comforts them by reminding them that their art, after all, comes from the creator himself; he sends them to earth to fulfill the curse but also offers a remedy for it: they will obtain royal patronage and acquire prestige and hence “will no longer be despised by *Brāhmaṇas* and kings” (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 36.66–67; Ghosh 1961: 236). The final verses of the text, which identify the “fruit” or merit that accrues to one who reads it, declare that those who study the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, produce plays in accordance with its precepts, or watch such plays as audience members will all “derive the same merit as may be derived by those who study the Veda-s, those who perform

sacrifices” (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 36.79; Rangacharya 1996: 344).

The term “*śāstra*” is usually rendered “treatise” or “textbook” and refers to a class of Sanskrit works purporting to offer systematic exposition of a given subject; there are *śāstras* on architecture, grammar, law, politics, erotics—even, allegedly, one for thieves. Typically, a *śāstra* opens with a myth revealing a divine source for the given body of knowledge and ultimately relating it to the Veda—the transcendent revelation preserved chiefly by Brāhmaṇas. Typically too, the organization of material in a *śāstra* reveals an almost obsessive concern for classification, usually according to numerologically significant schema (for example, the sixty-four coital positions cataloged in the *Kāmasūtra*, a *śāstra* devoted to eros); in these respects the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is quite standard. But what was the intended use, and who was the intended reader, of such a text? Some scholars have proposed that, although the *śāstras* claim to treat of the invention of disciplines and to offer instruction in them, they may be better understood as descriptive and ideological works that seek to bring existing bodies of knowledge and practice within the domain of the totalizing Brāhmaṇical project (Dahmen-Dallapiccola 1989). Like the eighteenth-century French encyclopedists or the British “gazetteer” writers of colonial India, the authors of the *śāstras* were as much concerned with demonstrating their own intellectual hegemony as in accurately describing the world around them.

Read from this perspective, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*’s frame story suggests the preexistence of a flourishing and popular theater, performed by mainly low-class actors but appealing to diverse audiences. The authors of the *śāstra* were both pleased and concerned by this phenomenon; they sought to explain it by affirming the genealogical credentials of *nāṭya*—its basis in the transcendent source of (Brāhmaṇa-brokered) knowledge—but also to explain its present, debased condition (which included vulgar stage business and the satirizing of highborn people like themselves) and to propose means for its purification and improvement. The rules that pad nearly every chapter seem aimed at the latter goal; they mirror the detail of older scriptures that minutely prescribed procedures for Vedic fire sacrifices—the ultimate model of ritually correct performance—and they also reflect the authors’ preoccupation with social hierarchy (for example, *Nāṭyaśāstra* 13.1–24; Rangacharya 1996: 101–2). These rules and schema may have been extrapolated from a handful of admired plays and then gratuitously universalized (Rangacharya 1996: 167), but although their enumeration may have provided satisfaction to some elite connoisseurs, it seems unlikely that ancient performers were constrained by such strictures. Most premodern theatrical training relied on apprenticeship and oral tradition rather than on textual study, as remains the case, for example, in Indian music despite the existence of numerous *śāstras* devoted to the classification of *rāgas*, *tālas*, and musical techniques. But there is evidence that some later Sanskrit playwrights did try to adhere to the “rules” attributed to Bharata; not surprisingly, this mostly resulted in unsatisfying plays. Paradoxically, the growing prestige of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* may have helped to kill off the drama it celebrated (Rangacharya 1996: 355).

My contextual reading of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* suggests the ideological agenda behind

its recipe for theater: at a time when Vedic sacrifice was in decline and Brāhmaṇa authority threatened, the authors of the *śāstra* sought to explain and reform a popular artform that “appealed to everyone” by likening it to ritual performance and by enveloping it in daunting Sanskrit terminology. The grand theories of our own *yuga* sometimes seem to me to have a similar aim: the product of increasingly marginalized humanist academics who perceive the greater prestige of “hard” science on the one hand, and of mass-market entertainment on the other, and who advance haughty analyses of the latter that imitate the former’s technical jargon. Academic criticism of Indian popular cinema displays a particular penchant for reductive typologies and stern agendas of improvement, based on a standard that no actual filmmaker ever seems to achieve—only the scholar-critic, it appears, possesses the knowledge to imagine the ideologically perfect film.¹⁴

Telling

There is general consensus among scholars that the storytelling conventions of Indian popular cinema are significantly different than those of most other film industries. Accounts of that difference generally focus on the “complexity” and “loose structure” of the plots, their lack of a “linear” narrative, and the presence of “discontinuities” in the form of both subplots and song and dance sequences. Such understandings take the form of assessments either negative or positive. Bengali director Satyajit Ray complained, back in 1976, of the commercial cinema’s “penchant for convolutions of plot and counterplot rather than the strong, simple unidirectional narrative” (23), such as he favored in his own films. Wimal Dissanayake and Malti Sahai, on the other hand, offer a more appreciative and culture-specific assessment: “Although...Indian cinema was heavily influenced by Hollywood, the art of narration with its endless digressions, circularities, and plots within plots remained distinctly Indian” (1992: 10–11). Thomas writes of “the baroque surface of the Hindi film” (1985: 117) and describes it as a form “in which narrative is comparatively loose and fragmented, realism irrelevant, psychological characterization disregarded, elaborate dialogues prized, music essential, and both the emotional involvement of the audience and the pleasure of sheer spectacle privileged throughout” (1995: 162). Her further statement that such an entertainment, to be successful, “involves the skillful blending of various modes...into an integrated whole that moves its audience” (Thomas 1995: 162) would of course be disputed by some. Prasad (1998) too notes the commercial cinema’s preference for “the all-inclusive film, whose vision of the world tends to be multifaceted, episodic and loosely structured” (47), but he sees this as resulting in “a textual heteronomy whose primary symptom is the absence of an integral narrative structure” (45).

Most scholars explain the structure of popular films historically, citing the influence of older storytelling genres—an argument I examine more closely in this section. Prasad is the major dissenter, however, and his countertheory needs to be considered. Although he alludes to the conventions of the “romance” in premodern

literature and also points to the resemblance of Hindi films to early American melodramas, his primary explanation of cinematic narrative structure is grounded in the economic and labor practices of the Indian film industry (Prasad 1998: 47). Dismissing the “overemphasis on cultural difference abstracted from the social formation as a whole” (1998: 13), which he finds characteristic of the cultural-historical approach, Prasad seeks to ground the conventions of Bombay cinema in “anarchic backward capitalism” (35) and in its adoption of a “heterogeneous form of manufacture,” in which films (like the watches in Karl Marx’s classic example of this mode of production) are assembled from separate components produced by specialist craftspeople (42–45). The screenplay, itself sometimes authored in committee, is only one of these components; music and song lyrics are others, as is star persona (an element predefined by other films); dialogs are composed by another specialist or set of specialists, and action sequences choreographed by another. Prasad concludes that “the story here occupies a place on par with that of the rest of the components, rather than the preeminent position it enjoys in the Hollywood mode” (1998: 43).

Although the specializations Prasad notes are indeed standard in the Bombay film industry, his implied contrast with a supposedly more “coherent” Hollywood product appears overstated. Given the fact that films are complex manufactured products that require large teams to create, Prasad fails to convince me that film production in India is inherently more “heterogeneous” than elsewhere. Moreover, his invocation of market “anarchy” (in which multiple independent producers operate under unstable financial conditions) does not explain why legions of producers, directors, and studios independently make similar choices in assembling films. Indian filmmakers are well aware of the alternative, “tighter” narrative models of foreign cinemas, yet they consistently reject these, even as they readily appropriate specific plot elements and shot sequences. The fact that screenplay and dialog are often authored by different persons is of course significant (though such a division of labor is not unheard of in the West). This practice reflects a generally looser cultural notion of “authorship” as well as the (already noted) high valuation of rhetorical art. Yet the inclusion of such specialized efforts does not preclude the achievement of a harmonious whole, and such “coherence” within the desired mix of ingredients in a commercial film is often praised by Indian viewers. In my view, the theory of “heterogeneous manufacture” fails to fully account for the enduring preference of Indian filmmakers and their audiences for epic-length, episodic, and “baroque” narratives. The study of cultural and literary history yields more compelling explanations, and it is to these that I now turn.

The influence of the classical epic traditions must indeed be noted. References to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*—each of which should be understood not as a fixed, Sanskrit-language text but rather as a multiform and intertextual storytelling tradition existing in hundreds of literary versions as well as in oral and visual performances—abound in popular art, from ubiquitous “god posters” to comic books to television advertising. Their themes (which include the tension between social

duty and personal satisfaction and between the lifestyles of renunciant and householder, the nature and transmission of authority, and the proper relationships between family members and social classes) are alluded to in everyday speech and formal discourse; images of their principal divine characters inhabit countless temples and shrines. Yet the assumption that these epics “influence” popular films must be qualified. Though there have been scores of film versions of each epic or (more commonly, given their length and complexity) of subsidiary episodes drawn from them, the sum total of such productions still comprises only a small portion of cinematic output. Far more common are allusions, in “secular” stories, to epic motifs via character names, dialog, or visual coding. As Gregory Booth observes, epic content “usually forms a secondary or allusory subtext rather than the primary text” in Hindi films (1995: 173). Such allusions presume an audience that is broadly familiar with the epics and offer it a pleasurable experience of recognition, but they coexist with many other references—to folktales, historical and current events, and indeed other films. It is the structure of the epics (and, I argue, of a much larger body of popular narrative) rather than their specific content that presents a parallel to the way in which film stories unfold. Dissanayake and Sahai observe, “Instead of the linear and direct narratives that conceal their narrativities, that we encounter in Hollywood films, the mainline Indian cinema presents us with a different order of diegesis that can best be comprehended in terms of the narrative discontinuities found in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*” (1992: 11). What is the nature of these “discontinuities”?

Apart from their sheer prolixity, with stories that span generations (three in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, seven in the *Mahābhārata*) and introduce scores of important characters, the pan-Indian epics share a number of structural features. They are both “boxed” by frame narratives that identify their authors (who are themselves characters in their stories) and the circumstances of their telling and that thus recapitulate the conventions of oral performance. Yet once the “main” tale begins, unfolding as a flashback, it too may be regularly interrupted by subordinate tales, which branch off from and return to it and which it, in turn, “frames.” These substories often recapitulate themes found in the larger plot, but with variations—as in a baroque fugue or (more aptly) a classical *rāga*. Though they may strike Western readers as “digressions” from the “main story,” they are not regarded as such by their primary audience, which savors the slow unfolding of the tale through such detours. In oral storytelling and dramatic performance, these subsidiary stories often provide the occasion for humorous set pieces, poems or songs that take on an independent life, interludes set in alluring or magical realms, or flashbacks, dreams, prophecies, and other devices that suggest the designs of fate or the illusory and cyclical nature of time. The effect is indeed nonlinear; rather it is one of circles within circles or of gears set within larger gears—as in a clockwork—that periodically “click” back together to slowly advance the largest, encompassing storywheel toward its already anticipated but repeatedly deferred conclusion. Aesthetically, the effect may be compared to the intricate melodic and rhythmic patterns of Indian music, that bifurcate into thematic

improvisations but regularly return to a common beat known as the *sama*—a moment that produces sighs of delight from knowledgeable listeners.

This structure can be illustrated with reference to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the shorter and more “linear” of the two epics (though the unwieldy *Mahābhārata* is even more interesting structurally). The story begins at its end, with sage Vālmīki (after a further frame story in which he invents the first poetic meter) composing the story of Rāma and teaching it to twin boys among his disciples; the boys then go to sing it in the court of its own hero, now a middle-aged king engaged in a multiday ritual. Unbeknown to Rāma (but known to the audience), the boy bards are his sons whom he has never seen, due to his having exiled his pregnant wife—a tragic event that will not be recounted until nearly the end of the tale. The story then unfolds, backtracking to the circumstances surrounding Rāma’s birth. Within this story many others are told, especially during Rāma’s youthful training by a sage; most of these tales reflect on the tension between the opposing lifestyles of ascetic sages and householder kings—prefiguring a resolution of this tension through Rāma’s own destiny as ideal *dharma*-ruler. In its final episodes the story returns to its frame for a dramatic scene in which Rāma recognizes his lost sons and is (unsuccessfully) reunited with his banished wife.

Both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its longer, darker, and more *Realpolitik*-savvy cousin-brother, the *Mahābhārata* (in which an extended royal family is riven by internal squabbles, leading to a fratricidal and apocalyptic war that virtually destroys the ruling class) are essentially about families and resonate with the real experience of many Indians who (regardless of their actual living arrangements) conceptualize themselves as members of close-knit extended kin groups. Both epics suggest that their familial microcosm (idealistically united in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, fatally split in the *Mahābhārata*) may also stand for society or, in modern times, for the nation. They are inherently “political” as well as “religious” stories, and their easy slide from interpersonal drama to social allegory is a trait shared with many mainstream films. So is their treatment of personality, which tends to divide contrasting psychological traits among a group of related characters, rather than locating them in a single conflicted individual. Thus the *Mahābhārata*’s five Pāṇḍava brothers, who share a common wife, often seem to function as one composite hero, split into different selves. The popular cinema also tends to externalize psychological conflict and distribute it over several characters—for example, Ashis Nandy (1989: 44) has noted the extraordinary popularity of the cinematic motif of the double, in which a single actor portrays twins, coincidental look-alikes, or a successively reincarnated person.

Yet the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* have always shared the spotlight, and in a real sense interacted, not merely with each other, but with other genres of popular storytelling that adhere to some of the same narrative conventions—favoring sprawling, epic tales—but that foreground rather different values. Regional folk epics, such as that of Pābūjī in Rajasthani (J. Smith 1991), Ḍholā in Hindi (Wadley 1989, 2004), Palnāḍu in Telugu (Roghair 1982), and the “three twins” in Tamil (Beck 1982), often celebrate the ethos of lower status but upwardly mobile groups,

linking them to pan-Indian and Sanskritic mythology but also asserting local identity and agency. Like many modern films, these complex tales may themselves make oblique reference to the pan-Indian epics, as when the popular Hindi martial cycle of Ālhā-Ūdal is interpreted as a “*Mahābhārata* of the *kali yuga*,” in which the vanquished warriors of the older epic, now reincarnated, become victors (Schomer 1989: 142; Hildebeitel 1999). Structural analysis of such epic storytelling—traditionally performed by bards in multisession, all-night performances—has yielded some interesting typologies, such as Stuart Blackburn and Joyce Flueckiger’s (1989) division of Indian folk epics into the broad categories of martial, sacrificial, romantic, and mythic. Booth (1995: 176–79) has proposed that these categories might better serve for analyzing mainstream films than the vague and overlapping commercial “genre” divisions sometimes invoked (for example, “mythological,” “social,” and “historical”).

The prestige of the Sanskrit epics has also tended to eclipse, at least for outsiders, the popularity of narrative traditions that, although similarly imbued with myth and fantasy, express a decidedly more worldly, sensual, and entertainment-oriented ethos. Such are the popular tales of the first millennium CE that eventually found their way into the massive Sanskrit anthology *Kathāsaritsāgara* (Ocean of Rivers of the Great Story), where they are framed as a heavenly entertainment told by Śiva to his wife Pārvaī. These tales often feature heroes who are wily merchants, disenfranchised princes, or poor (but not especially pious) Brāhmaṇas and whose aim is less the pursuit of *dharma* than the acquisition of wealth and worldly power; they also enjoy love affairs with glamorous women along the way. To accomplish their ends, the heroes often undertake impersonations, commit thefts, and carry out adulterous seductions, and though they are occasionally assisted by supernatural forces, they just as frequently skewer both pious pomposity and folk superstition. The pace and style as well as the self-assertive ethos of these “action-adventure” tales, which are characterized by abrupt plot turns and mood shifts, dramatic reunions and recognitions, and lyrical interludes set in demidivine or magical realms, are indeed suggestive of *masālā* films (see, for example, van Buitenen 1959: 111–27, 179–258). They also include a feature that is generally not foregrounded in the ancient epics (though it sometimes enters into their oral retelling): a strong current of (often irreverent) humor. Though recorded in a number of famous texts, such stories remained in oral circulation throughout the premodern period, and with the coming of typography found their way into the flourishing Hindi-Urdu chapbook literature known as *qissā* and *kahānī* (Pritchett 1985).

There remains another confluent current of Indian popular narrative to be noted, one that is of special significance for popular cinema. I refer to a strongly Islamicate strain, which has generally been overlooked by scholars invoking the “epic” genealogy of mainstream films. I use “Islamicate” rather than “Islamic” to refer not to the impact of Muslim religion, but to the influence of a cosmopolitan urbanized culture that set norms for much of western, central, and South Asia for roughly a thousand years. This culture, reflected in (for example) styles of dress, diction, architecture,

and music, was embraced to a considerable extent even by polities that remained “Hindu” in their ritual practices or that even articulated an “anti-Islamic” ideology (Kesavan 1994: 245–46; Wagoner 1996). The narrative traditions of the medieval Perso-Arabic and Turkic-speaking world had themselves been influenced by ancient Indian story literature (for South Asia, or al-Hind, was famed to the West as the “land of story”), but they had also evolved their own distinctive tales, in which fairies and *jinn*s took the place of the demidivine beings of Indian lore, sorcerers replaced Tantric adepts, and the hero’s love affairs were inflected with a Ṣūfī flavor, permitting readings as allegories of a divine quest. Though the pain of separated lovers had long been celebrated in Indian poetry and story, the Ṣūfī influence, together with the strict gender codes of many Islamic societies, accentuated the theme of a hero’s consuming infatuation for an inaccessible beloved, culminating in romantic desperation and even death (“martyrdom” in the way of love, mystically allegorized to *fanā* or the “annihilation” of self in divine unity). Entering India with Islamic traders, warriors, and wandering Ṣūfī *fakīrs*, the Islamicate narrative traditions, especially those of the Persian *mathnawī* and *dāstān*, combined with indigenous strains to produce hybrid manifestations of extraordinary vigor, ranging from local folk sagas (such as the Punjabi tale of the doomed lovers Hīr and Rāñjhā; see Hasan 1973) to courtly romances that found their way into multivolume literary form. Two genres of the latter deserve special mention here.

In the aftermath of the conquest of much of northern and central India by Muslim rulers at the close of the twelfth century, Ṣūfī orders greatly expanded their activities, establishing *khānqāhs*, or “hospices” (usually built around the tomb of a revered Ṣūfī preceptor), that attracted a diverse clientele by no means restricted to Muslims. Ṣūfīs were particularly interested in indigenous mystical traditions and a lively interaction—at times adversarial, at times dialogic—developed between *fakīrs* and *yogīs*. The older form of the *mathnawī* had been developed primarily in Persian cultural areas as an elaborate love story, generally involving a heroic quest, which could be enjoyed as poetic narrative but also savored as mystical allegory. Beginning in the late fourteenth century, a group of Ṣūfī authors in northeastern India used these conventions to craft epic-length romances in the local lingua franca that they called Hindavī (“the language of Hind”). They fused the intense romanticism and quest themes of Persian literature with characters, legends, and a general cultural ambience that was entirely Indic and indeed Hindu—thus after a prologue that invoked Allāh and Muḥammad, the works slipped into the pattern of Indian tales involving princes who became *yogīs* and featuring miraculous interventions by gods such as Śiva. Four such *premākhyāns*, or epic-length “love stories,” survive, the last composed in 1545, but there is evidence of others that have been lost (Behl and Weightman 2000; de Bruijn 1996; Shirreff 1941). Although there has been much speculation regarding the intended audience and use of these works, there is evidence that they were recited in both royal courts and Ṣūfī hospices (Behl and Weightman 2000: xiii–xiv). Significantly, one of the rare accounts of an informal performance from the Mughal period, written in about 1640 by a Jain merchant from

Banaras, describes his “singing” of two of the Ṣūfī romances composed about a century earlier, during regular evening sessions with a group of friends (Lath 1981: 49). From today’s perspective, what is also striking about these romances is their anticipation of conventions of popular cinema: complex plots involving a love-triangle of a hero and two heroines, lyrical set pieces placed in exotic or fairytale landscapes, and a pattern of the repeatedly deferred union of the principal lovers in order to develop the *rasa* of passionate love-in-separation.

Oral storytelling remained a popular entertainment form in Islamicate South Asia and was continually reinvigorated by Persian-language traditions. During the Mughal period (ca. 1555–1765), there was a virtual craze among both aristocrats and commoners for Persian sagas called *dāstāns*, which were long, episodic romances narrated by professional bards. The genre was gradually Indianized, with significant transformations, not the least of which was that it shifted into Urdu, the nonelite lingua franca of the Mughal Empire. The traditional subject matter of the Persian *dāstān* was *razm o bazm*—“war and romance”—but characteristically, Indian *dāstān*-tellers added two more *masālās* to the blend: magic (*ṭīlism*) and trickery (*‘ayyārī*). The former allowed for fantastic otherworlds and enveloping “enchantments” in which a hero might wander for years; the latter highlighted the talents of a comic but dextrous sidekick: a tricksterlike figure who added a leaven of bawdy or scatological humor and worldly wise pragmatism to the hero’s lofty ideals and who thus resembled the clownlike *vidūṣaka* of Sanskrit drama. Significantly, although many of the themes of the *dāstān* are shared with the aristocratic romances found throughout Europe and the Middle East, humor is generally downplayed elsewhere; in India, a “comedy track” often takes the spotlight (Pritchett 1991: 41–42).

The most popular Indian *dāstān* was that of Amīr Ḥamzah, an uncle of the prophet and a minor figure in the early history of Islam. Like Alexander before him, Ḥamzah captured the imagination of storytellers and became the central figure in a vast cycle of tales, full of expressions of Islamic piety yet essentially secular and escapist in theme. His adventures were recited on the steps of the Great Mosque in Delhi, and some aristocratic connoisseurs kept their own in-house *dāstān*-tellers to endlessly narrate the cycle. Like the heroes of the Ṣūfī *premākhyāns*, Ḥamzah acquired, in the course of his exploits, two principal wives, one human and one a fairy—though he enjoyed a host of other amours. His first and most passionate love, for the Persian princess Mihr Nigār, was unconsummated for eighteen years while he wandered in the fabulous realm of Qāf, home of fairies and *jinn*s. Storytellers alternated between the trials of Ḥamzah and those of his suffering beloved, who was repeatedly rescued from violation by the ingenuity of Ḥamzah’s *‘ayyār* sidekick, ‘Amar. Ultimately Ḥamzah was united with Mihr Nigār, his fairy wife joined the household, and he lived happily until his eventual (historical) martyrdom in one of the prophet’s battles. Within this framework, which spans four generations, endless expansions and permutations were possible, and the length of a narration depended only on the ingenuity of the teller and the enthusiasm of listeners. Both were evidently considerable, and surviving accounts mention daily narrations that went on

for months. Versions of the Ḥamzah cycle found their way into literary form during the Mughal period, entering the libraries of connoisseurs as illuminated manuscripts. But the real explosion of Ḥamzah texts occurred with the spread of printing during the second half of the nineteenth century. It culminated in the version published by Naval Kishore of Lucknow, a Hindu enthusiast for Islamicate literature (this was not unusual), who assigned a team of scribes to three oral *dāstān*-tellers and, between 1883 and 1905, issued what is almost certainly the world's longest narrative: a *Mahābhārata*-dwarfing *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamzah* comprising forty-six volumes averaging nine hundred pages each. This staggering work was not simply a pulp-fiction curiosity; it was a literary achievement, an “astonishing treasure house of romance, which at its best contains some of the finest narrative prose ever written in Urdu” (Pritchett 1991: 27)—though it should be noted that its prose is regularly interspersed with lyric interludes. It was also, by the standards of the time, a bestseller: “the delight of its age; many of its volumes were reprinted again and again” (Pritchett 1991: 27). According to Frances Pritchett, this literary *dāstān* reached “an extraordinary peak of popularity” at the close of the nineteenth century and then gradually lost readership, by the end of the 1920s, to the emerging genres of novels and short stories, though the early examples of these were themselves “very dastan-like” (1991: 27).

A reader of the Ḥamzah *dāstān* today (made available in Pritchett's condensed but artful translation) can note the similarities of its repetitive episodes, its themes of love, honor, and heroism, as well as its sheer scope and narrative profligacy, both to earlier Indian genres and to the “*dāstān*-like” narratives of popular cinema. The period that witnessed the apogee of Ḥamzah's popularity coincided with both the flourish of the Parsi theater (whose plays drew equally on Hindu epics and Indo-Islamic romances) and also the beginnings of the cinema. The Islamicate strain in the latter is often overlooked. Although the Maharashtrian Brāhmaṇa D. G. Phalke based his early feature films on Hindu legend, the growing industry soon reached out to a broader narrative pool. With the coming of sound, Persianized Hindi/Urdu with its strong literary and romantic associations became the dominant language of Bombay cinema (Kesavan 1994), and plots were often drawn from Indo-Persian romances, as in the five remakes of the story of Lailā and Majnūn—a tale that ranks with that of *Devdas* as one of the most often filmed in Hindi cinema (Booth 1995: 179). The highly charged lyrics of film love songs, with their Islamicate vocabulary, are not merely conventionalized inserts without “social currency” (Prasad 1998: 111); they evoke a world of romantic and refined entertainment that encodes powerful emotional ideals as well as a history of cultural syncretism.

Concluding Reflections

Among the conventional answers to the titular question (“Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?”) that Ramanujan briefly entertained was the assertion that there once *had been* such a distinctive Indian “way,” but that modernity and globalization had

largely eliminated it (Ramanujan 1990: 41). Similarly, some may propose that the cultural forms and practices discussed in this article indeed influenced Indian films of past decades, but that they have become increasingly irrelevant in recent years. Certainly, market liberalization and the expansion of consumer culture since 1990, coupled with the impact of cable television and digital technologies, have contributed to recent big-budget films having a significantly “slicker” and more “world-class” look, and such factors as the growing power of the middle classes and the rise of multiplex cinemas catering to “niche” markets have also contributed to more experimentation by mainstream filmmakers¹⁵—a healthy trend that seems likely to continue. Yet, to my view, many of the most popular Hindi films of recent years continue to exemplify the ideologies and practices I have described, and their characteristic intertextuality now delights an audience that, because of “classic movie” cable channels as well as video and DVD rental shops, is even more keenly aware of Indian cinema’s distinctive genealogy and of its visual, aesthetic, and narratological conventions. And this brings me to Ramanujan’s—and my—conclusion.

After summarizing some of the grand theories that account for (or deny) the uniqueness of Indian concepts and practices, Ramanujan attempted his own answer to his question. Citing his training as a linguist, he invoked the classification of grammatical rules as either “context-sensitive” or “context-free” and extended these to the reigning self-idealizations of societies.

I think cultures (may be said to) have overall tendencies (for whatever complex reasons)—tendencies to *idealise*, and to think in terms of, either the context-free or the context-sensitive kind of rules. Actual behaviour may be more complex, though the rules they think with are a crucial factor in guiding the behaviour. In cultures like India’s, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation (Ramanujan 1990: 47; emphasis in original).

Whereas Euro-American society imagines itself to be founded on principles that are “universal” and “rational” (hence, context-free), indeed to conceptualize space and time—“the universal contexts, the Kantian imperatives”—as uniform and neutral, Indian epistemologies, for which “grammar is the central model for thinking” favor typologies and hierarchies that particularize and frame within complex contexts (Ramanujan 1990: 51, 53). Ramanujan cites numerous examples, ranging from legal statutes (in which penalties for crimes depend on the social identity of the parties involved) to erotic treatises (“the Kāmasūtra is literally a grammar of love—which declines and conjugates men and women as one would nouns and verbs in different genders, voices, moods, and aspects” [1990: 53]) to classifications of time and space that eschew “uniform units” in favor of contextualized specificities. In poetry he cites the “taxonomy of landscapes, flora and fauna, and of emotions” that establish contexts for poetic imagery, and in narrative literature he points to the ubiquitous practice of framing, invoking the epic traditions of “metastory” that frame and

encompass subsidiary narratives (Ramanujan 1990: 48–50). Ramanujan advises, “We need to attend to the context-sensitive designs that embed a seeming variety of modes (tale, discourse, poem, etc.) and materials. This manner of constructing the text is in consonance with other designs in the culture. Not unity (in the Aristotelian sense) but coherence, seems to be the end” (1990: 49).

Yet the ability to perceive the coherence of “context-sensitive” texts will of course depend on the context of the reader. Victorian critics, idealizing a “realist” aesthetic and a tightly constrained temporal and spatial canvas, typically found Indian narrative cycles to be incoherent: the products of a childish and febrile imagination. It took the sea changes of the twentieth century—the crisis of the World Wars and of imperial collapse, the formulation of depth psychology and of theories of the unconscious and the attendant re-evaluation of dreams and myths, the literary experiments of Gabriel García Márquez, Gunter Grass, James Joyce, and others, and indeed the advent of cinema itself with its potential for flashbacks, dissolves, and a surreal and dreamlike mode of storytelling—to slowly change the prevailing context of narrative reception. As one consequence, academic scholarship on the Sanskrit epics during the past half century has tended to stress their coherence and integrity of design.

Alertness to the “context-sensitive designs” of Indian popular films may appear to be a tall critical order. The modes of cultural practice and bodies of literature and lore that I have identified in this article constitute some relevant contexts; they interact with the historical, psychological, ideological, technological, and economic ones identified by others. Certainly, the more one knows of such contexts, the more one will be able to see in a given film. The scholarly study of Western cinema appears to manifest preferences for both relatively “context-sensitive” and “context-free” approaches. The grand, reductive theories—structuralist, Marxist, Freudian—belong in the latter category, and though each has something to offer, the analysis of individual films, especially those that are recognized as enduringly significant, rarely relies on any of them exclusively. Yet when the critical lens is turned to a non-Western culture, sweeping theory may appear more seductive: a handy substitute for having to bone up on a dauntingly multifaceted context.

Examples of a culturally “context-sensitive” reading may be found in Thomas’ efforts to elucidate the “intertextuality” of Hindi films, based on her assumption that such films are “always read and produced in relation to other texts and discourses—other films, mythology, popular art, gossip, and so on” (1995: 158). Her article on Mehboob Khan’s 1957 hit *Mother India* shows how much such an approach, when focused on a single influential film, can reveal (Thomas 1989; see also Chatterjee’s signal monograph on this film, 2002). Similarly, Booth’s sensitivity to the “reflexivity” of Hindi cinema, which “gains its primary value from the audience’s knowledge of the genre or story being performed (or referred to) and from a collective awareness of the performance as artifice” (1995: 184), yields surprising insights into the “densely layered religious, cultural and narrative meanings” of film songs (2000: 131) or the pleasurable complexity (including allusions to epic

characters and situations, to other films, and to the off-screen lives of stars) of Subhash Ghai's 1993 potboiler *Khalnayak* (1995: 185–86).

In a famous article on art and mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin cited the ebullient 1927 prophecy of Abel Gance that the advent of cinema would lead to the avid re-presentation of all significant cultural stories: “All legends, all mythologies and all myths...await their celluloid resurrection, and the heroes are pressing at the gates” (2002: 104). While studying the popular culture of premodern India—a society that prized the tactile act of “seeing” as a medium of communication, delighted in episodic, nonlinear tales that were elaborately and self-consciously framed, and regarded operatic dance-drama as the ultimate art form—it has often struck me that its heroes and heroines were indeed eagerly awaiting cinematic reincarnation. Within their profuse intertextual world, premodern Indian storytellers were already fond of flashbacks, lyrical interludes, surreal landscapes, and vast and crowded Cinemascope tableaux; their language was visually intense, almost hallucinatory: screenplays awaiting the screen. A gaze that is more sensitive to Indian contexts will be better able to take in the audiovisual epics of their cinematic heirs and to savor (and critically evaluate) the *rasa* they offer to hundreds of millions of filmgoers.

Notes

1. An essentialism is risked even by Ramanujan's title, since it appears to conflate the modern nation of “India” with a larger cultural region. Though I preserve the term in my own parody-cum-homage title (in part because the film industry I discuss is indeed located in post-Independence India, although some of its conventions may be shared with other cinemas based on the subcontinent), I disavow any imperialist vision of South Asia as “greater India.” Further, given the venue in which this article is appearing and some of the texts and traditions that it cite, I am particularly concerned to avoid appearing to conflate “Indian” cultural forms with exclusively “Hindu” ones, as I hope later sections of the article make clear.

2. With a few exceptions (for example, Dickey 1993; Pandian 1992), most English-language scholarship has focused on the widely distributed Hindi/Urdu cinema based in Bombay/Mumbai, despite the fact that this industry has always existed in a complex and interactive relationship with cinemas in other languages (for example, Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu). Although my own linguistic limitations oblige me to perpetuate this imbalance, I look forward to emerging scholarship (for example, S. E. Pillai's current research on the great Tamil studios of the 1950s–70s) that will contribute to a more nuanced picture of intra-Indian influences.

3. A variation on this approach is taken by Nayar (2004), who uses the work of Walter Ong and others to argue (with an unfortunately reductive strategy and condescending tone) that Indian cinematic conventions exemplify an “oral” and “non-literate” mindset, also reflected in premodern narrative literature such as the classical and folk epics.

4. Indigenous concepts of “seeing” and their relationship to cinematic convention, especially in the representation of love through song sequences, are examined in Taylor (2002).

5. Applied to films, this means that audiences (allegedly) have difficulty identifying with principal heroic characters and may relate better to minor (but more earthy and “real”) characters in comic subplots (Prasad 1998: 71–72).

6. Exceptions are the occasional charismatic priests who manage their own temples; these include many non-Brāhmaṇas and women.

7. Indian film audiences are likewise known for “talking back” to screen images, expressing both positive and negative reactions that would be unacceptable in most Western cinemas.

8. Since, like many important Sanskrit texts, it exists in variant manuscripts and may represent the work of multiple authors, it is difficult to date, and scholarly estimates of its period of composition vary by as much as twelve hundred years (fifth century BCE to eighth century CE).

9. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is available in two English translations, one complete (Ghosh 1961, 1967) and one abridged (Rangacharya 1996). In addition, two of its most influential chapters (six and seven, which deal with the expression and reception of emotion) appear in a full translation with commentary (Masson and Patwardhan 1970).

10. See the *antākṣarī* sequence in 1993’s *Khalnayak*, noted by Booth (1995: 185–86). A formalized version of *antākṣarī* became a popular TV “game show” in recent years. Other informal performances of film scenes are not uncommon and are sometimes represented in films themselves (as in 1996’s *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun!*, when wedding guests play a pass-the-pillow game in which the one who is “it” must perform a famous film speech or song, or 1995’s *Rangela*, in which the heroine’s film-crazed father communicates with his family mainly through quoted song lyrics).

11. For example Thomas’s observation that “film-makers talk about ‘blending the *masalas* in proper proportions’ as one might discuss cookery,” their goal being “to achieve an overall balance of ‘flavours’ ” (1985: 124); as well as the generic *masālā* label for films, which normally designates a “blend of spices.”

12. Apart from the terms “*bhāva*” and “*rasa*,” other categories found in the Sanskrit literature on theater linger in everyday usage; thus the borrowed English words “hero” and “heroine,” commonplace in Hindi and used primarily for filmstars, have a connotation that is closer to the Sanskrit *nāyaka* and *nāyikā* than to their English meanings. In Hindi, *hīro* connotes not simply a protagonist or “heroic” character, but a central male figure of extraordinary versatility, wit, martial prowess, and erotic energy and appeal (though this is generally tempered by a strict moral code). There is also an implication of star charisma that replaces the demidivine nobility of the (often royal) *nāyaka* of earlier drama.

13. There have been fledgling attempts in this direction. Booth (1995: 175) offers a brief analysis of the *rasa* sequences of the 1958 film *Amardeep*; Sanskritist Gerow

(2002) compares the *Poetics* of Aristotle to the elucidation of *rasa* aesthetics in the tenth-century Sanskrit text *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardana, using brief analyses of films as diverse as Jean Renoir's *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*, and Satyajit Ray's *Devi*; Joshi (2004) uses *rasa* theory to analyze what he terms the "affective realism" of the popular 1998 film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*.

14. Thus Prasad (1998: Chapters 6–8), after characterizing two decades of Hindi films as manifestations of a single, politically retrograde master narrative, proceeds to read the following decade's crop of popular "mobilization," middle-class, and art films as failures of various sorts. Similarly, Kazmi's (1999: 235) withering assessment of commercial output is followed by an equally bleak reading of "alternative" cinema.

15. For example, director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's critically acclaimed *Black* (2005), which contains no songs.

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