Between Narrative and Expressive, Fantasy and Melodrama in Bombay (Bollywood) Film

By Wendy F. Hsu

Abstract

Facing the hegemony of Bombay cinema, an intriguing irony lies in the intersecting point of film's extreme popularity and its highly formulaic form.   To understand this phenomenon, a discussion on the subjectivity of Bollywood[1] film spectatorship, rather than the objectivity of cinema as the nation's collective consciousness (Chakravarty, 1993; Kakar, 1983), is solicited.   This paper first marks a fantasy space of differences in which cinematic elements are negotiated: narrative vs. expressive modes; fantasy vs. melodrama forms.   Drawing from an Indian gothic classic *Mahal* (Amrohi, 1949), the paper then seeks to obscure the differentiation between the paradigmatic elements and, lastly, redefines the generic boundary between the formulaic and the non-formulaic, in turn, explicating the power dynamics of Bollywood productions.

Difference and fascination

As most Indian movies seemingly adhere to a prescribed form, there invariably exists a space of the unexpected to which the spectator is incessantly drawn. This space of fascination or "difference" is where the heterogeneous elements of the cinematic language reside and are negotiated: In it, there are (a) codes of narrative that make up a filmic reality with content-specific materials, for instance, prefigured by societal or familial "morality" and (b) extra-narrative modes of expression, such as the mise-en-scene of the picture and the music of the song scenes. I argue that this space is precisely what proffers the magically captivating force of Bombay cinema, in the eyes of Indians around the world.

What I mean by "difference" is not a difference in the configuration of heterogeneous narrative or expressive elements in one film from another, but the hook of curiosity (about differences) that sustains the spectator's fascination, or simply put, the thing that glues him to the screen or drives him to the movie theater. Rather than only the formal differences, in the diegesis of the filmic reality, what I am after is a difference that exists in an individual's

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subjectivity: how one responds to film. The space of ambiguity in the spectator's cinematic experience allows for a different response to each film, from one screening to another, from one person to another. In other words, in this space, catering to her personal appetite and sensibility, the spectator accepts or rejects the elements of her cinematic experience and then projects her subjective filmic reality. Here I attempt to formulate a less monolithic paradigm of Bombay film spectatorship. Contrary to Sudhir Kakar's (1983) figuration of "the cinema as a collective fantasy," or Sumita Chakravarty's (1993) notion of "imperso-nation,"[2] my intent is to carve out a more ambiguous space of Bombay's cinematic experience—in which exist a myriad of individual subjectivities—in turn to explicate the popularity and homogeneity of its productions.

Though it seems that I am conflating the two terms—difference and fascination—too readily, what I am drawing out is exactly this space where these two concepts meet. The cinematic experience is fascinating, but with fear. One is fascinated to see new, different objects on screen, but also frightened to see something too foreign (e.g. a ghost, a murder). As Steven Shaviro (1993) poignantly puts it, the cinematic experience is a "radical passivity. I do not have the power over what I see, I do not even have, strictly speaking, the power to see; it is more that *I am powerless not to see*" (italics as my emphasis). Fascination keeps my eyes wide open, so that I do not miss a split moment of the dynamic picture; and fear tantalizes me to want to see more to resolve the already-induced anxiety. The paradoxical affects—of being fascinated and fearful simultaneously—evoked by an immediate film spectacle emerge from a space of perceptual difference between the normal everyday reality and the heightened filmic "reality." In other words, the spectator's subjectivity is a capricious one suspended between knowing and not knowing the difference between reality and filmic reality.

The question of whether something on screen is believable recurs in cinematic discussions. Compared to real-life situation, the triad between perceiving, knowing and believing in cinematic situations is unique. We don't always believe in what we see (and I'm not suggesting that we do believe in everything we see in real life). But at the same time, isn't the purpose of movie-going letting ourselves be deceived by the objects on screen? How is it that we accept certain parameters of "reality" shown on screen and reject others? It is obvious that we "know" that we are sitting in a theater, but how are we engrossed by the film flickering at us? To resolve the paradox, I must configure a gray area between "knowing" and "not knowing." Furthermore, it is the "shock effect" of the film medium, prefigured by Walter Benjamin (1968)

in "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"[3] that obscures the epistemological line.   Only after the viewer is confused about (between knowing and not knowing) the fact that he is watching a movie, he can begin to enjoy a bullet-flying Mafia scene or a heart-wrenching song of a yearning lover, within the safety net of a cinematic setting. The epistemological ambiguity allows the cinematic experience to be simultaneously believable and unbelievable, thus ostensibly entertaining.

Facing the paradox between the formulaic repertoire of Bollywood and India's vast cultural diversity, the key to understanding is the "difference" between the hegemonic mainstream and the marginalized side stream, between the different cinematic modes of expression, and between the generic characteristics.

Mahal: mainstream vs. side stream

In the scope of cultural dynamics, the idea of a mainstream culture is strong but never complete. The side stream, ignored in most discourses, logically reflects the whole: It discloses what is repressed by the hegemony as well as what is repressing, the hegemony itself. Rather than a direct vista to the dominating populous, offered by the mainstream cultural artifacts, the side stream is capable of divulging a view perhaps more rounded than the mainstream, which potentially threatens the fringe existence of its underdog.

The genres of gothic, horror, and suspense hardly exist in Bombay cinema. One wonders whether this is a symptom of its strict censorship. By definition, ghosts are excluded beings of the normative ontological structure. It is conceivable that the destabilizing effect of a ghost film is apt to threaten the fundamental ground of the Indian morality typified by familial harmony, particularly in filmic representations, which can be extended to signify an overall stability of the Indian society. In addition to an implicit threat to the moral structure, the affective responses (fear and fascination) to a ghost film put it on the blacklist for disturbing the equilibrium in the ethical practice in film.

Mahal (Kamal Amrohi, 1949) is such the case. It features a story of a ghostly woman who seductively haunts the man whom she loves. Unlike most other Bombay productions, *Mahal* has no villain (at least on a conspicuous level), no impression of a strong familial tie (i.e. a brutal lack of a motherly figure), not to mention the absence of a closure in a family's blissful union. Made two years after India's independence from the British in 1947, Kamal Amrohi's gothic film is an underdog comparing to its contemporaries, for instance, those of Raj Kapoor's nationalist hits.

Considering its form, it is no surprise that there are the prescribed song sequences in *Mahal*. It adopts the formula of having six or seven songs in the film's entire length. Besides the conformity to Bollywood's song formula, *Mahal* departs from Bollywood's norm in contents. The fantasy-like narrative, based upon a ghostly female character, is negotiated by a final courtroom scene as a resolution. Between its form and contents, the conglomeration of the dispersed generic characteristics in *Mahal* includes those of musical, fantasy, and social melodrama. As an outlier in Indian film industry, *Mahal* blends in elements of the Bollywood

formula, however, in a rather eccentric manner. My objective here is to look at how this film serves as a negotiation space for the hegemonic forces of Bollywood: by reading *Mahal* in terms of its juggling between the narrative and the expressive, fantasy and melodrama.

Narrative vs. expressive

The relationship between the narrative and the expressive in film is often difficult to grasp. In the case of Bombay movies, one easily assumes that the song sequences serve the expressive function whereas everything else—either seen in the picture or heard in the dialogues—makes up the bulk of the narrative. According to Gregory Booth (2000), "The music scenes of the Hindi cinema visually and verbally express that which Indian social norms would otherwise define as inexpressible." It seems to me that Booth is bridging the gap between film aesthetics and the Indian social reality too readily. What is socially inexpressible or tabooed is immediately subsumed in the music scenes of Bombay films. The mediating role of spectatorship is dangerously dismissed in his assertion: just how differently do we view these music scenes apart from the non-music scenes?

Rather than conflating the socially ineffable with Bollywood's formulaic expressive mode, namely, the song-and-dance sequences, I would like to offer a more complex view: In both sound and sight, what we experience in the music scenes potentially serves a narrating function; the non-music scenes, an expressive means. Departing from Booth's assertion, the "inexpressible" should be placed within the context of the film itself, its diegetic reality, instead of the social reality of the spectator. Only from the viewer's subjective grappling between the reality or unreality (or fantasy) of her cinematic experience—how she perceives of the sound and sight emitted from the projector and speakers and then formulates the cinematic contents into a coherent filmic reality, the process of film viewing can be understood. From here I proceed to a reading of how the auditory and visual expressions in *Mahal* function in the narrative register, as one of the ways to break up the narrative-expressive dualism in the analysis of Bollywood cinema.

Kamini's song

Kamini is the name of the now-deceased woman who died awaiting a ghostly return of her lover in the mahal (meaning "mansion" in Hindi) 40 years prior to the onset of the film's plot. The legend goes such that upon his tragic death, he promised Kamini, "I will return." The intent of the filmmaker is to set up a palimpsest love story. Through the idea of reincarnation, the legendary romance of Kamini and her lover (the original owner/builder of the mahal) is reenacted by the current love affair between the *ghostly* Kamini (Maghubala) with the present owner of the same building, Shankar (Ashok Kumar). What has to be convincing is that Shankar actually sees and hears the ghostly Kamini (for the obvious reason that he can fall in love with Kamini). As a narrative concern, Shankar is to necessarily believe that he is Kamini's reincarnated lover, hence his destiny to complete the unfinished love affair. A unique portrayal of Kamini thus is called for two reasons: First, she is a ghost; second, she can be perceived only by Shankar.

Considering its time (1949), a visual synthesis of a ghost was technically impossible. To work around that, one of the solutions that the filmmaker conceived was the use of one specific song (resorting to the song sequence formula of mainstream Bollywood) to signify the ghostly

presence. The signifier song of Kamini is "Aayegaa Aayegaa" ("He'll come, he'll come"). The first occurrence of the song takes place only nine and a half minutes into the movie when Shankar is alone in the mahal. What is notable is the disembodied nature of the voice in the first 30 seconds of the song. The picture shows that Shankar is attracted to the beautiful, yet incorporeal voice of a woman and is determined to find out its source—the body from which the sound is emitted. As Michel Chion (1999) notes in *The Voice in Cinema*, the disembodied voice is analogized to an apparition "wandering along the surface, at once inside and outside, seeking a place to settle, especially when a film hasn't yet shown what body this voice normally inhabits."

In addition to the coincidental relationship between the nature of disembodied voice in film and the desired apparition effect, another intriguing point elicited by Chion concerns the sexualizing of such a voice through the process of embodiment. "The not-yet-seen voice possesses a sort of virginity,… Its *de-acousmatization*, which results from finally showing the person speaking, is always like a deflowering." As soon as Shankar matches the voice with the attractive body of Kamini, he becomes seduced by the sound-and-body entity named Kamini. It is therefore logical to assume that without the embodiment of the voice, or *de-acousmatization* as Chion calls it, Shankar can hardly become obsessed with only the ephemeral ghostly voice, and the viewer can scarcely identify with Shankar, in acknowledging the apparition's existence.

Furthermore, while the song's title and lyrics[4] provide a tantalizing innuendo to the connection between Kamini and Shankar, what seems to me a more effective means of application of the song is its recurring pattern, in both music and non-music scenes. Following the first music scene, featuring Kamini's "Aayegaa Aayegaa," is an instance where a similar music scene is replayed (at 19:38, only ten minutes after the start of the first one). Moreover, instead of playing the entire song scene, there are a number of non-diegetic reductions of the same song that occur intermittently throughout the storyline. The non-diegetic economized version is a signifying musical phrase containing the words of just the song's title (and refrain), "Aayegaa Aayegaa." Always followed by the clock's chiming on the strike of two (signifying two o'clock in the morning as the time the lovers secretly met), this leitmotif serves as a haunting reminder to Shankar of the ghostly Kamini. The non-diegetic form illumines that Shankar is the exclusive audience of this particular number. The film viewer is hence obscured by a semiotic ambivalence that Shankar is experiencing either an objective ghostly figure or his own illusion. As we shall see later, this ambivalent use of the non-diegetic music plays a crucial role in the film's narrative.

Picturizing Kamini
In addition to the aural portrayal of Kamini, the way in which Kamini is depicted in picture is also of interest. The two visual codes that invariably inscribe her presence in the film are the architecture and the/a clock of the mahal. While the most pronounced forms of Kamini are manifested in the song sequences, where she is given a full spectacle in both sound and space, it is worthwhile to note that her bodily existence is enclosed by the architecture of the mahal. Because of her history, i.e. of having died in the mahal, she is now a ghost whose physicality is confined and necessarily clings to the building. The filmmaker thus meticulously positions her body within the symbolic realm of the mahal, specifically, by showing her standing under an arched doorway, or layers of arched doorways, of either the interior or the gazebo outside of the mahal. Looking at an example of the artful mise-en-scene (Figure 1), one gets the sense that Kamini is imprisoned in and by the physical structure and, psychoanalytically speaking, the

symbolic register of the mahal. To take it a step further, the story of the mahal (as the movie's title) is also the story of the woman who lingers in and around the mahal.

Beyond the sound of the clock as discussed previously, the sight of the clock flashes sporadically throughout the course of the film. Before Kamini's first official staging takes place, an early scene subtly juxtaposes a large grandfather's clock with Shankar alone in the mise-en-scene as a foreshadowing device (to signify Kamini's coming). Immediately follows that scene is the clock's strike of two in sound which not only acts as a transition to, but sets the stage for the first music scene, Kamini's first appearance. After the metonymic relationship between Kamini and the clock (of the mahal) is established, her existence gradually works its way out of the confinement of the building: The signifying power is no longer exclusively designated to the one clock in the mahal; as the story progresses, her spirit begins to pervade and eventually resides in all of the clocks in the film's picture. Another key moment where a clock appears in the mise-en-scene is when Shankar *nearly* shares an intimacy with his wife Ranjana (Vijayalakshmi) whom he marries despite of his nightmarish encounter/illusion of Kamini. Shown in Figure 2, the clock, strategically positioned in a space next to Shankar and Ranjana, signifies an intrusion into the relationship—an exclusively intimate space—shared by the married couple.

Kamini or Asha?
There is a total narrative subversion in the finale in which a courtroom scene reveals that Kamini is actually the gardener's (of the mansion) daughter, Asha, who obsessively dresses as the ghostly Kamini. Thus, in the diegetic time, Kamini only exists as a name in the history of the mahal; neither her spirit nor body lingers. Having always yearned for a fantastic romance, as a woman of a lowly social status, Asha realizes that she will never near a fairy tale's happy ending. Eventually she deceives herself into believing that she is the woman of the legend, the destined lover of the reincarnated man now named Shankar. The filmmaker's task then becomes to trick the viewer with the same blind spot that blocks Shankar's vision: thinking that Kamini and Asha are two separate individuals (although played by the same actress). The difficulty, however, lies in the irony that Kamini and Asha *should not* appear to be one and the same person, according to Shankar's perspective, but simultaneously, Kamini and Asha *should* in fact be the same individual, following the filmic reality. The key to the desired semi-opaque demarcation in the Kamini-Asha double is a specific use of the non-diegetic music configured early in the movie.

Following the first song scene, Shankar burns his finger with a cigarette butt as a reality check. Immediately a soft ostinato creeps in as he notices a fleeting movement of a person. Stealthily, he approaches the room into which the person has sneaked. While the music continues to play in the background, the picture first freezes on Shankar's gaze through the arabesqued window (Figure 3.1), then cuts to the contents of his voyeuristic gaze: a woman (Kamini/Asha) who is caught off-guard after the realization that she has been gaped at (Figure 3.2). While picturizing the object of Shankar's gaze, the music shifts abruptly into an out-of-tune,"distorted" sound of a string instrument which resembles the ostinato theme earlier. At the moment Shankar ceases to gaze at Kamini/Asha and seeks to enter the room in which the woman now stands (Figure 3.3), the background music slips back to the normal, "undistorted" version (or the original form) of the ostinato. Not for long, as Shankar steps inside the room and looks for the already-disappeared Kamini (Figure 3.4), the music falls back to its distorted state. Without the knowledge of being looked at, this time Shankar then becomes Asha's object of gaze through the arabesqued window (Figure 3.5). Here, Asha gets her share of the normal

background music, however, distinct from the previous ostinato which signifies Shankar's perspective.

As an effect, the abrupt shifting of the non-diegetic music brings about the different characters' points-of-views. The first ostinato insinuates Shankar's perspective in encountering the Kamini/Asha character. Of the two versions, the undistorted one signifies that he is in disbelief of her ghostly existence. The moment he sees her in the room, the distorted version indicates that she is the same woman whom he saw singing a few minutes earlier (in the music scene) and that Shankar's mesmerized state is confirmed. As he approaches the entrance of the room, the undistorted version returns as a way to signify his curiosity and, more importantly, skepticism about his encountering of a female ghost. The moment he steps into the room and discovers that the woman has vanished so swiftly like a ghost, he affirms that he has seen the ghost of Kamini, thus the return of distorted music. Finally, a different musical theme, accompanying Asha's looking at Shankar, signifies a different subject of gaze from the previous one. Furthermore, the undistorted sound suggests that this is a normative gaze of a human being, not of a ghost (notice that I use "Asha" rather than Kamini, her ghostly double). In short, the use of contrasting non-diegetic musical themes highlights the difference between who's looking at whom, as well as, whether the gazer is seeing the reality or having an illusion. The non-distorted music naturally corresponds to the normal perception of reality while the distorted music accents the distorted vision, or illusion (of Shankar).

The incapacitate Shankar

Contrary to other characters, Shankar is an incapacitate protagonist who gets virtually no diegetic music in the film. The only moment he has access to the diegetic music occurs when he sits in front of the piano inside the mansion. This only happens twice and each time for less than 30 seconds. His first performance, in which he plays a minor-key composition typical of the Romantic-Era piano virtuosics, abruptly ends by a violent knocking on the door. The entrance of his father into the mansion not only disrupts Shankar's playing, but forces him out of the mansion and eventually into marriage with his fiancée Ranjana.

The second instance of Shankar's piano playing takes place toward the end of the film. This performance again is interrupted after 23 seconds into the piece when the veiled gardener's daughter Asha enters the scene. Followed by, again, a few disturbing knocks on the door, this sequence terminates as the police unexpectedly arrest Shankar. Twice in the movie, Shankar's diegetic performance is cut off by a surprising intervention of the lawful order, signified first by his father, then by the police.

Moreover, Shankar is not just a "mute" who gets no diegetic music, but also a hallucinatory who hears too much music non-diegetically: He seems to be the only person that hears (and sees) Kamini. Several points throughout the story, he reveals his desperate need for silence. In the beginning, after seeing Kamini in the first musical number, Shankar reveals to his lawyer friend Srinath (Kanu Roy), "let me come to my senses. I need my silence." Again, halfway through the narrative, Shankar indicates to his wife his desire to cure his hallucination of hearing Kamini unceasingly: "This is the solitude, the silence I wanted to find. In this wilderness, I will be in peace and I will love you." These assertions not only navigate the course of the narrative, they also implicate the haunting existence of Kamini within Shankar's personal "reality" and reify these figments of Shankar's imagination, as well as the spectator's fantasy space.

Hopefully, one can now gather the impression that the dichotomy between the expressive and the narrative may not be as rigid as suggested by most scholars. Aesthetical expressions such as diegetic songs, background music, and mise-en-scene ultimately function to *narrate* the "inexpressible," in our case, the ghostly character of Kamini as well as her relations with other characters. The narrative and the expressive function and, for the purpose of discourse, are read in conjunction of one another.

Fantasy vs. melodrama

We usually conceive of ghosts as marginalized beings in our everyday reality. Despite that they resemble human beings in thinking, behavior, and even appearance at times, a movie about a ghost automatically leads one to think of it is as a fantasy.   But this isn't just a story about a ghost, but a man who is obsessed with a ghost (or vice versa) which turns out to be a full human being! The subverting effect of enclosing the resolution in the order of law tempts one to infer to the melodramatic paradigm, the universal genre that subsumes most Bombay productions. As Rosie Thomas (1995) states,

> the films are centrally structured around contradictions, conflicts, and tensions primarily within the domains of kinship and sexuality, and that it is an expectation of Hindi film as a genre—in accordance with the conventions of melodrama—that these conflicts are resolved within the parameters of an ideal moral universe.[5]

Here Thomas offers a reading of mainstream Bollywood films as a space of negotiation of moral conflicts. The centrality of this melodramatic paradigm is morality: the good always triumphs; the bad always fails; and in terms of kinship, the family always reunites (as a symbol of ultimate goodness). However, in the case of *Mahal*, it is difficult to pinpoint the source of villainy. If we take Shankar as the hero of the story, one may ask, why is he so incapacitate (i.e. easily seduced, void of a sense of duty, especially toward his wife)? While the ending supplies a resolution to a mystery set up early in the movie, the central kinship is ultimately shattered, for Shankar's wife commits suicide in the end. If there were anyone to blame for the disastrous closure, i.e. the deaths of Shankar and Ranjana as well as the unrequited love between Kamini/Asha and Shankar, it would be Asha. However, despite of her confession in court declaring her deliberate acts of deceit, she still gets a break from the law: The court's verdict pronounces her innocent and Shankar guilty of the murder of Ranjana. Even after Shankar is

proved innocent of the murder of his wife and released from his hanging, he still dies restlessly as his spirit is suggested to linger on.

Do these points of unconventionality, in both narrative and characterization, make this film an exception of the mainstream Bollywood production? I am not ready to make that inference. It seems to me that the problem does not exist in that there are conflicting elements of both fantasy or melodrama in this film, but that the problem is precisely this difference, the generic difference between a fantasy and a melodrama. Even if we somehow resolved the problems of narrative and characterization as elicited above, we are still left with a string of mythical, inexplicable events, namely, Shankar's resemblance to the man in the portrait (of the deceased lover of Kamini), Shankar's purchase of the mansion, the simultaneous stopping of the clocks both inside the campsite (wherein Shankar and Ranjana temporarily takes refuge) and of the mahal's exterior. Certainly the construction of the film's diegesis does not allow us to read them as mere coincidences. In this respect, I find Slavoj Žižek's (1991) contention useful:

> What is useful here in this inversion by means of which silence begins to function as the most horrifying menace, where the appearance of a cold indifference promises the most passionate pleasures—in short, where the prohibition against passing over into action opens up the space of a hallucinatory desire that, once set off, cannot be satisfied by any "reality" whatsoever.[6]

What Žižek offers is a gaze at the story events from a different angle, a look that inverts the coincidental and the fantastic into meaningful points of the narrative. A key to this "awry"[7] look is the "hallucinatory desire," in the case of *Mahal*, Shankar's obsessive hallucination of Kamini. While it is easy to see that the object of desire is Kamini, what seems to me more important is the subject of desire—Shankar.

The story tells from Shankar's perspective: It begins with his encountering of Kamini/Asha and ends with his death. Throughout the diegetic course, Shankar is also the most desired one. He is wanted by Kamini/Asha and his wife Ranjana (who in fact commits suicide because of Shankar's lack of affection to her). The center of desire is Shankar who even conjures up music (in both music scenes and non-diegetic music) and images to stage his fantasy. Even after the usurping moment which unfolds Kamini's real identity (as Asha), Shankar yet persists in his fantasy in desiring this woman by calling her Kamini. His fantasy perseveres even through the very last scene when he sees that Kamini/Asha, dressed in bridal attire, has married

his best friend Srinath. Although she remains silent, the close-up shots of her "indifferent" facial expression tempts one to think that there is, in her, a repression of desire for Shankar, echoing Žižek's inversion of "a cold difference [that] promises the most passionate pleasures." And finally, disregard of her marriage to Srinath and Shankar's death even, it is implied that Shankar will return as a ghost to continue the unrequited romance with Kamini, as we are aurally prompted by Kamini's song "Aayegaa Aayegaa."

The open-ended conclusion is atypical of Bollywood films, and certainly of the melodramatic form. More importantly, the lingering effect not only marks a fantastic closure but accentuates the fantastic structure of the film. The stark contrast of *Mahal* to Bimal Roy's *Madhumati* (1958), made nearly a decade later, illuminates the negotiation between fantasy and melodrama. While the story also narrates about a ghostly return of a deceased lover named Madhumati (Vyjayantimala), the bulk of the narrative portrays a normal love relationship between Anand (Dilip Kumar) and Madhumati in the form of a flashback. The manifestation of a ghost occurs for only six minutes and perhaps, more crucially, the movie concludes with a close-up on the new-born son of the reincarnated Anand and Madhumati, now a married couple, signifying the kind of happiness defined by the orthodox measures of Indian morality with its emphasis on family unity (Mishra, 2002). Seeing the latter as the more "melodramatic" (and less fantastic) of the two films, one has to reconsider the designation of Bollywood productions as melodramas.

I find Thomas' definition of Hindi films—as melodramas in which "conflicts are resolved within the parameters of an ideal moral universe"—not inclusive enough, especially for films that have a suspense or gothic twist. What is more important is not whether conflicts are resolved within the parameters of a moral structure, but the way in which these conflicts (as well as their resolutions) are presented. To borrow from Vijay Mishra (2002), Indian movies are formulaically enacted upon the "melodramatic staging." Here the idea of the melodramatic is based on Rey Chow's (1993) inspiration from reading Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*:

> This *automatizing* of the human body fulfills *in a mechanized manner* a typical description about a debased popular form, melodrama, that its characters are characters "who can be guaranteed to think, speak and act exactly as you would expect…"[8]
> The typical features of melodramatic expression—exaggeration, emotionalism, and Manichaeanism—can thus be redefined as the eruption of the machine in what is presumed to be spontaneous.

> Gestures and emotions are "enlarged" sentimentally the way reality
> is "enlarged" by the camera lens.[9]

In addition to the visual exaggerations of sentimentalism elicited by Chow, Bollywood's elaborate music scenes, with their fantasy-like settings and contents, appear to be a rather brutal case of this melodramatic "automatizations," in which humans (most often women) act as if they were singing and/or dancing machines that have been programmed to appeal to the fantastic desire of the viewer.

It is worthwhile to note that, in comparison to *Mahal*, Bimal Roy's *Madhumati* has better internalized and perhaps domesticated the melodramatic mode: with more music scenes. On the other hand, *Mahal* seems to play on this ambiguous space between the melodramatic and the fantastic, as a way to literally embody Bollywood methods in sexualizing the other. The full-blown spectacles of female singer-dancers (or courtesans) in revealing attires are no longer "random" and coincidental. These songs and pictures are inscribed into film as a surrogate for a fantasy space to solicit the (male) viewer's hallucinatory desire. The conflation of female characters with ghosts and courtesans, evident in *Mahal* (in which only females are entitled to the privilege of musical numbers), is a subtle, but strikingly subversive instance that follows the protocol of Bollywood's infamous expressive narration for presenting spectacular sound and sight in the syncretic genre of fantasy-melodrama.

Notes

[1] "Bollywood" is a generic term that conglomerates the film and its industry in Bombay. However, by convention in discourses, Bollywood is often used inclusively to refer to the entire Indian cinema as one genre.

[2] Referencing Slavoj Žižek, Benedict Anderson, and Homi Bhabha, Chakravarty prefigures the idea of *imperso-nation* as an "articulating principle" of Indian popular film and national identity and applies textual analysis which treats films as "instances of social and cinematic meanings and codes." *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987*, pp. 4-7.

[3] Benjamin writes, "The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film." "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, p. 238.

[4] The lyrics of "Aayegaa Aayegaa" read: Like a moth dying though no lamps are lit, like a boat without a rower seeking shore, …he will return someday, he'll come, he'll come…" Undoubtedly, the words signify a ghostly relationship, however, the nature of the subject of desire, whether it is a ghost desiring a human being, or vice versa, or a ghost desiring a ghost, is left ambiguous for an effect.

[5] Thomas, R., "Melodrama and the negotiation of morality," *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, p. 159.

[6] Žižek, S. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, p.90.

[7] Using the title of Žižek's book. See Endnote 5.

[8] Chow's citation of James Smith, in *Melodrama*. London, 1973: Methuen, p.18. See Endnote 8 for more details.

[9] Chow, R. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, p. 61

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Figures

Figure 1. The "arched-in" Kamini

Figure 2. The omnipresent clock

Figures 3.1 - 3.5. The human/ghost gaze between Shankar and Kamini/Asha

3.1. Shankar's "uncertain" gaze

3.2 Kamini, being gazed at as a ghost

3.3 Shankar seeks to confirm the object of his gaze

3.4 Shankar confirms his illusive gaze

3.5 the humanly gaze of Asha