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The Anti-Colonial Revolutionary in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema

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Vidhu Aggarwal,
"The Anti-Colonial Revolutionary in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema"
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Abstract: In her article "The Anti-Colonial Revolutionary in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema" Vidhu Aggarwal discusses several contemporary films including Rakesh Omprakash Mehra's *Rang de Basanti* with focus on the figure of the revolutionary hero. The Bollywood film is a cultural form that combines several aesthetic styles, from within India and from the outside. With its formal heterogeneity and as a product of one of India's largest cities, Mumbai Bollywood has had an ongoing fascination with "arrival," that is, with India's status as a contemporary nation-state. While some Bollywood films seem to celebrate fantasy scenarios of India's arrival on the global scene, at the same time they express anxiety about affective possibilities within a new Bollywood of higher production values and larger global reach, an India of mobile borders and attenuated historical context. Aggarwal examines the way the contemporaneity of Bollywood — both in terms of acting style and aesthetics — is negotiated through reenactments of the colonial period and compares Bollywood cinema with aspects of the British film *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by Danny Boyle.

Vidhu AGGARWAL

The Anti-Colonial Revolutionary in Contemporary Bollywood Cinema

While Bollywood films enjoyed popularity in Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Africa for decades, there has been a push for a more marketable form of popular Indian cinema in the West. In a global marketplace, Western consumption of India's cultural products — whether books, beauty queens, or movies — has become an important sign of India's claim to modernity. Although Mumbai's (formerly Bombay) popular Hindi-language cinema has usually been associated in the West with strange and outrageous musical films and plots derived from Hollywood, Western directors such as Baz Lurhmann (*Moulin Rouge*, on Luhrmann, see, e.g., Zubarev <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss2/15>) and Danny Boyle (*Slumdog Millionaire*) have incorporated the Bollywood idiom in their films as a type of kitschy cool and formal innovation. Having won a suite of awards, including the Oscars for Best Picture, Director, and Song, the British production, *Slumdog Millionaire,* is socio-realistic fantasy shot on location in Mumbai with an Indian cast and crew. India's Bollywood success story in the West is, after all, not quite a Bollywood film, or even an "Indian" film. "Could an Indian have made *Slumdog*?" has been a refrain in commentaries about *Slumdog*'s success in the U.S. and in England. If *Slumdog* is not a Bollywood film, the story behind *Slumdog's* production — a British director with little funding and lots of guts goes to India to make a film with a cast of unknowns — is the plotline of Rakesh Omprakash Mehra's popular 2006 film*, Rang de Basanti* (Color it Saffron). In this fantasy of a British woman making a "Bollywood" film about colonial India, *Rang de Basanti* seems to ask: Does it take a Western perspective to make Bollywood cinema truly modern? In *Rang de Basanti*, Indian elite youth have "gone global," taking on a "cool" urbanized disaffection. A young British woman arrives in India with a desire to make a film about the struggles of famous Indian revolutionaries (Bhagat Singh, Chandresekhar Azad, Rajguru, Ramprasad Bismal, Ashfaqullah Khan) against colonial rule as depicted in her grandfather's diaries of the early 1930s. A group of Delhi college students must be "retrained" in the history of revolution as the British woman attempts to recreate in them the authentic fervor from India's colonial past in order to act successfully in her film. In this way the acting out of British colonial nostalgia reinvigorates dissident political energies in the young. With an aesthetic interplay between the colonial romance and the contemporary youth film, Mehra attempts to make the trauma of colonial history new, youthful, and exciting. By contrasting scenes of the increasing dissident youth in present day India with scenes of the young protagonists playing revolutionaries in *Rang de Basanti*, the film envisions a particular brand of more violent anti-colonial protest as the harbinger of modernity. *Rang de Basanti* updates the colonial romance as a space of collaborative fantasy shared by Indian and British subjects and the masochism of colonial nostalgia in the film highlights the arbitrary violence of both colonial rule and the modern nation-state. Moreover, the staged sadomasochistic encounter between the colonial guard and the revolutionary underscores the ongoing perversions of modernity, repeated in the ambivalent relationship between the Indian subject and the modern nation-state.

If *Rang de Basanti* produces a fantasy of what a Western consumer wants from India, it also asks: Should we give Western consumers what they want? Through these various aesthetic and political registers, the film enacts broader questions about colonial fantasy, masculinity, national identity, and modernity, as well as the rhetoric of martyrdom and terrorism in a period of what Arjun Appadurai refers to as "high globalization." Appadurai's coinage, "high globalization," allows us to think of the aesthetics of various modernities across multiple locations, without invoking the temporal demarcations of the postmodern and postcolonial. "High globalization" also lets us consider colonial narratives as forms of fascination and trauma that are not over — but are, rather, in high gear. In *Modernity at Large* and *Fear of Small Numbers*, Appadurai suggests the "nation-state" itself is an outmoded form within a shifting global economy, where flows of capital, people, and goods are the norm, and various "mediascapes" allow for mobile affiliations across national borders. Nevertheless, the fantasy of the nation-state resurges more strongly than ever, even as transnational entities erode its centrality and power. What Homi Bhabha calls "these ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space" (142) continue to persist in the imaginary of Bollywood cinema as a way in which modernities are

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contested, and as a source of sentimental fixation. Even as increasing attention has been given the phenomenon of Mumbai cinema as "global," scholars such as Sumita S. Chakravarty, Tejaswini Ganti, Vijay Mishra, M. Madhava Prasad, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, and Jyotika Virdi have highlighted the constructions of various nationalisms produced by the industry from post-independence, that repeatedly reassert an imaginary unified India. However, within the larger framework of film culture in India, popular Indian cinema or Bollywood-style, has historically been seen as a negligible form of low culture by elite Indian critics vis-à-vis Western forms of film. Although Bollywood films include a pastiche of cultural and historical styles and consistently "quote" Hollywood and other plots, these conventions have more often been seen as propagating bad, frivolous, or unintentionally kitschy copies of source material, rather than working within an innovative or postmodern aesthetics as described by Fredric Jameson and others. While today there is a greater celebration of Bollywood aesthetics as representing "authentic" Indian culture and national identity, modernity in Indian film is still marked by realistic aesthetic. Indeed, the marketing of *Rang de Basanti* as a "realistic" film signals its contemporeinity and modernity.

Like the earlier *Lagaan*, which also had a significant lead role for a white actress, *Rang de Basanti* was a winner of Indian Filmfare Awards and India's entry for Oscars. It also had high DVD sales among Indian diaspora audiences in the U.S., Canada, and England, and was nominated for a BAFTA award (British Academy of Film and Television Arts). In both *Lagaan* and *Rang de Basanti*, the future of the modern nation-state is contested through dramatizations of anti-colonial protest — fetishizing the traumatic struggles of heroic figures against the oppressive imperial state to "naturalize" India's claims as a sovereign nation on the world stage. However, *Rang de Basanti* produces a particular combination of *masala* (a form of the interaction between genres), by incorporating the historical re-enactment/colonial nostalgia within a contemporary urban youth film. *Rang de Basanti* in this way shares as much with *Dil Chahta Hai* (The Heart Desires), a popular film of romance about a group of frolicking Indian urban youth, as *Shaheed* (Martyr), a 1965 film idealizing the martyrdom of the young anti-colonial revolutionary, Bhagat Singh and his companions. Moreover, both through its own advertising and the response of the press, *Rang de Basanti* has been viewed as a film that both speaks to and represents the actual feeling of contemporary urban Indian youth, in public discourse referred to as the "*Rang de Basanti* generation" (Saxena <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2532182.cms>). However, as many critics have discussed, contemporary Bollywood has a different relationship with the urban center and national identity than previous popular Indian films, and a number of filmmakers have shifted their focus on the working class and poor (e.g., *Mr. 420*, *Mother India*) to concentrate on the family and romantic dramas of a young global elite. As Jignai Desai suggests, the trend in recent years of privileging a mediated global cosmopolitanism over a stricter East/West binary in earlier films such as the 1970 *Purab Aur Paschhim* (East and West) speaks to the utopian dimensions of global marketing, in which India is cast as an economic player on the world stage. Contemporary Indian media, both television and film, circulates glamorous images of a visible transnational elite through cable networks and film houses in major urban centers worldwide. Unlike earlier youth films, such as *Purab Aur Paschhim*, where Western culture may be an alluring yet corrupting force, many contemporary films represent an urban Indian able to negotiate skillfully between cultures, dress styles, with legerdemain.

Nevertheless, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Tomorrow May Not Come), *Kabhi Kushi, Kabhie Gham* (Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness) and a number of other films of the last decade mediate between modern life and tradition through similar tropes as earlier films such as *Purab Aur Paschhim*, where tradition and culture can be a form of gendered training: Bharat, a sophisticated Indian man goes to London and brings the dislocated mini-skirted London Indian girl back to India where she finally learns to dress and act "Indian." He not only infects her with his values but various other members of the Indian diaspora, as well as others who fall sway to his singing; the catchy musical numbers act as mode of conversion. In *Purab Aur Paschhim*, the earlier pre-independence period is referenced early on in the black-and-white narrative of Bharat's revolutionary father, whose sacrifices Bharat vindicates with his reassertion of "Indian" values via a connection with the brightly colored contemporary post-independence homeland. While the film places the origins of the nation-state in the colonial framework, there is a clear distinction between the colonial past and modern present. Despite this

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demarcation, there is a sense that traditional Indian values (represented by "Hindu" values) and affiliation to the nation can move between this past and present.

Taking place in a moment several generations removed from independence, *Rang de Basanti* configures "Indianness" as much more elusive. Globalization produces such an intense alienation and disaffection with the modern nation-state that it takes a British woman to sustain the fantasy of India's pre-independence promise. However, this British woman, Sue, is not figured so much as other but self. She has little trouble "fitting in" with the Delhi University students she meets through her friend Sonia, whose attire and sensibilities very much resemble her own. Delhi is a utopian urban metropolis, not so different from London. Therefore, when the young men she encounters through Sonia — Daljit, Karan, Aslam, Sukhi — complain about corruption and lack of opportunities, nowhere is this lack reflected in the mise-en-scène. Although the students come from different religious and economic backgrounds — rich boy, working class boy, Sikh, Hindu, Muslim — their discontent is leisurely and nebulous. These students possess a contagious, beer-swilling joie de vivre that is celebrated in the film. Their forgetfulness of history and present-day reality is fun, and yet, perversely, they are not happy because they realize their fun is only temporary, hence, Daljit's refusal to leave college. Their biggest troubles come from a Hindu fundamentalist group that attempts to disrupt their romping drink fests. The sensibility and style of the musical numbers in which characters roam around Delhi in a Jeep reflect the commercial advertisement background of Mehra. Sue arrives in India, a speaker of Hindi and knowledgeable in revolutionary history. However, rather than British-inflected, the hip-hop style of the A.R. Rehman musical scores and the graffiti painted on the walls of their favorite hangout riffs off a neutral US-American style; hence, Sue's encounters with the locals is liberated from historical colonial relationship, despite her wall of photos, maps, and writings with her grandfather's diary. However, rather than merely signifying a neo-colonial Orientalism, Sue's fascination with Indian history, language, and culture offers proof of the potential commercial viability of an "Indianness" that can be transmitted; her presence in the movie as a near Indian demonstrates the global reach of Bollywood through the inclusion of the Western subject as protagonist. This particular Bollywood iteration of modernity, the colonial paradigm of "going native" transforms into the transnational paradigm of "going global." Here is an India seemingly liberated from history, a history that only Sue, an outsider, seems to covet.

Jann Dark has argued that the white woman's association with capitalism and modernity in *Rang de Basanti*, *Lagaan*, and Indian advertisements, buttresses the dominance of the Indian male and affirms nationalist constructions of gender. Dark suggests that romance with the white woman offers a form of redemption for the various humiliations the Indian male suffered in the colonial dynamic and offers a fantasy of symbolic wholeness á la Frantz Fanon. Indeed, this introduction of the British woman in both *Lagaan* and *Rang de Basanti* harkens back to the imperialist romances popular in the 1980s, based on the novels of E.M. Forester and Paul Scott. Both David Lean's film *Passage to India* and the television series *Jewel in the Crown* highlight the British woman's consumption of Indian culture and the perils of such erotic consumption. In these films, the erotic gaze of the British woman is correlated directly to the punishment of the Westernized Indian man, who is jailed and beaten for his purported sexual aggression against her. The eroticism in these romances depends on the sado-masochistic degradation of the Indian male linked to the British woman's excessive, misplaced, and ultimately impossible desire. Renato Resaldo has perhaps the most blunt description of the "paradox" of "imperialist nostalgia" that plays out in these romances: "A person kills somebody, and then mourns the victim" (2). According to Resaldo, this nostalgia disguises any complicity of the mourner in this loss, in effect erasing the traumatic history. In relationship to imperialist nostalgia, Jennifer Wenzel describes "anti-imperialist nostalgia" as a phenomenon in a formerly colonized nation, in which the pre-independence period becomes an idealized ur-moment of potential, not necessarily fulfilled in the present day nation-state. In both forms of nostalgia, the pre-independence period acts as a fetish or an object that compensates for the trauma of Britain's loss of empire and India's occupation under colonial rule. If for Anne McClintock, the fetish, as both commodity and psychoanalytic "perversion," work off the "failure of a single narrative of origins" (203) whether cultural or sexual, *Rang de Basanti* offers a type of doubling of India's narrative of origins as a nation-state. In *Rang de Basanti* two types of fantasies — imperial and anti-imperial — overlap. Although Sue is the supposed director of a

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documentary film, she also acts symbolically as the fantasy audience, both a witness to India's successful transformation into a global force and the Western subject who provides recognition for the historical trauma behind India's birth into modernity through sentimental affiliation with heroic individuals.

In the last decade, Mumbai cinema has had a recent resurgence of films concerning Bhagat Singh: *Ansh* (Small Part), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, *23 March 1931*, *Shaheed*, and more recently *Rang de Basanti*. In the latter, the story of Bhagat Singh and his comrades is represented as the "new," a yet unexplored arena of history, not yet saturating the marketplace, unlike the already commodified Gandhi, whose face has appeared on billboards advertising for Apple computers. After retracting her funding, Sue's British backers tell her that "Gandhi sells," not revolutionaries. But perhaps this more recent spate of films about Bhagat Singh reflects a turn in the self-figuration of India from the conciliatory tone of the Gandhi/Nehru model to the promotion of a more violent dissident energy in pace with India's militarism. For even as the film seems to celebrate active resistance, this rebellion is very much in alignment with the spectacle of Indian military prowess. One pivotal iconic scene, repeated on posters and DVD covers, is that of the young men, shirtless near a military airfield, leaping up at the sight of military jet. The young ripped bodies of the men are visual homologues to a narrative of military progress. While there is a criticism of the Hindu right (the film is located in the time when the Bharatiya Janata Party was in power), there is no explicit revelation that the pilot's protection of the homeland actually involves an ongoing war with Pakistan. The framing of the bare bodies against the plane seems to produce a celebratory linking of the beauty of the male body to technological prowess of the modern nation-state.

Despite representing the Bhagat Singh story as unknown entity, *Rang de Basanti's* initial prison house scenes inevitably quote Manoj Kumar's 1965 film *Shaheed* (Martyr), which ends with Bhagat Singh and his comrades walking proudly to the noose singing "*Rang de Basanti*," the revolutionary slogan turned into a Bollywood anthem. While there is no singing in Sue's documentary or the film as a whole, the noose is fetishistically figured, similar to both the earlier 1965 version, and 2002's *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*. *Rang de Basanti*, therefore asks knowing audiences to compare Sue's version of the story against these other "Bollywood" productions of the story. In other words, the director imagines how a British filmmaker would revise a story already depicted cinematically many times through Bollywood versions, via a more "realistic" aesthetic filter, the documentary. Sue's arrival makes the Bhagat Singh story "new," as well as more "real."

At the same time, Sue's documentary is not at all "realistic" in terms of the set up of *Rang de Basanti* as a whole. Without backers or funding — and with a single camera in hand — how could Sue's film possibly have the action effects or production values that we see on the screen? Aside from one long musical interlude where the group frolics around Punjab filming here and there, there is little evidence of the filmmaking process. The film is produced as if by magic. Rather than a "documentary," Sue's film is more of a sentimental docudrama. Her main difficulty does not appear to be a lack of money, but the alarming lack of good "natural" actors who are serious about the roles. With the camera set up on the grounds of Delhi University, Sue looks for traces of passionate fervor in various "unknown" students, who one by one disappoint her. As Sue auditions students as actors in her documentary (on location and in natural light), they have stilted responses to the lines, or they mispronounce the national anthem as they sing off-key. In some sense her audition test replicates the worldwide critiques about the excessive melodramatic acting styles that are prevalent in Indian popular films. The problem with the Bollywood style of acting against more "natural" modes has perhaps been an absence of depth and interiority where everything is expressed in a slick sentimental surface. Emotion is announced. One of the effects of the British director's test is to confirm that the actual stars of *Rang de Basanti* and the Bollywood icon, Aamir Khan possess this interiority. In this sense, *Rang de Basanti* demonstrates that merely announcing a love for India is not enough to reveal "Indianness." However, the stars never actually audition for the parts. Instead, in Sue's encounters with the group of friends, they begin to morph into Chandrasekhar Azad and other revolutionary figures, in sepia, before her eyes. Her very vision transforms them into revolutionary heroes. Sue has initial difficulties in making the students take the story seriously, when it has nothing to do with their own reality. They sing tunes from other Bollywood movies and make frivolous jokes while Sue

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becomes increasing frustrated with their lack of discipline. Even as students relent partly because of Daljit's attraction to her, they remain jovial throughout the filmmaking of the intense scenes, moving easily between film reality and their own. For example, a scene shows Daljit practicing his revolutionary lines on a cow. Sue's imposition of a "serious" aesthetic perspective in the documentary about the revolutionaries and her grandfather, the jail guard McKinley, can be seen as an attempt to tame and discipline Bollywood's song-and-dance frivolity. In the frustrating process of training one of the actors in a rehearsal of a speech, Sue also adds a Hindu fundamentalist to the cast, who knows instinctively how to recite the speech with feeling. Despite his awkwardness and misguided involvement in the fundamentalist group and stalking of the corrupt fun-loving friends, he possesses a genuine connection to history the others lack, as if, indeed, his rejection of the materialistic Western values of Daljit and the gang, do indeed allow for a greater sense of authentic connection to the past. Part of the melodramatic surround of the film is the reconciliation of the Hindu fundamentalist with Aslam, the Muslim, who unite idealistically as friends in the revolution.

The glossy sepia tones of Sue's film (with McKinley's voiceover) emphasize the artificiality of her "documentary" and the "pastness" of the events being staged, and yet because the actors are the same this past and present lose distinction. Even as it depicts scenes from the "violent" activities of the revolutionary terrorist — the Kakori train heist, the assassination of Colonel Saunders, the non-lethal bomb explosions in the theatres — Sue's film becomes less an account of revolutionary actions than a staged encounter of the British officer's relationship with the revolutionary, through the structured romance between the reluctant jailer and the rebel. Indeed, *Rang de Basanti* opens with Sue's film, with sepia shots of a prison house, where her grandfather, the British guard Mr. McKinley leads the resolved Bhagat Singh to his death. McKinley's admiring voiceover about the prisoners accompanies images that move back and forth between the sepia-tinged past and Sue's brightly colored present: the opening scene contains various images of resolute prisoners, a sad-eyed McKinley, images of McKinley's diary, and present-day images of Sue reading this diary. We can look at this romance between the torturer and prisoner as a type of masochistic paradigm of the prisonhouse of "universal" or modern aesthetics, against the youthful excesses of the students who just want to have fun.

When Gilles Deleuze describes masochism in his *Coldness and Cruelty*, he emphasizes the contractual nature of masochistic staging. Masochism is associated with the art of persuasion, suspense, and scriptedness. According to Deleuze, the masochistic contract demonstrates the absurdity of the law, which is supposed to punish and place interdictions. Within the masochistic framework, the subject undergoes punishment and "feels that he is allowed or indeed commanded to experience the pleasure that law was supposed to forbid" (88). Therefore, the paradigm of masochism breaks down the master/servant hierarchy when the submissive subject trains the dominant one in the art of humiliating him. Masochistic fantasy becomes a negotiation between the ideal (contracted) and personal (revealed self), a shift in and out of subject positions. There is a utopian dimension to masochism, as the possibility of seeing oneself formalized as something else — art, story, theatrics, drama. The fantasy allows the subject to objectify himself/herself, and therefore make "himself" anew. The particular reenactment of the jailing of Bhagat Singh and the other revolutionaries is a fantasy that reveals the reversal of power and hierarchies that the masochistic paradigm performs. For instance, in the latter part of the 1965 version of the story, *Shaheed*, Bhagat Singh's austerity and self-discipline, his willingness to martyr himself and accept punishment, creates a transformation not only in his more violent fellows prisoners, but also in his Indian jailer who serves under the British. In this way, the jailer and the jailed reverse roles, and the prisoner educates the jailer concerning the absurdity of the law, the colonial system, which ensnares them both. Indeed, in one scene from *Shaheed*, one of the prison guards picks up the dirt upon which Singh walks, deifying him. In a similar manner, in Sue's film, McKinley deifies the revolutionary figures in "documentary." At one point in the film, Sue's grandfather breaks down while in a church, unable to reconcile himself to his role. He looks at the wounded body of a statue of Christ, reflecting the martyrdom of Ramprasad Bismil and Ashfaqullah Khan, who are tortured and wounded. In the diary voiceover, McKinley is moved by how the stoic prisoners will not break down, despite being tortured. As McKinley continues his narration, we see an aestheticized image of a muscular Ashfaqullah Khan, forced to lie naked on a bed of ice.

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Indeed, McKinley's admiration comes from the resolution with which these men go to their deaths reflected by the beauty of their bodies. *Rang de Basanti* produces, then, a fantasy, not only of the British as witness to the sufferings of Indian subjects, but a particular mode of witnessing in which the British subject sheds tears in place of the Indian subject, who merely conducts a necessary unsentimental duty to the state. Through the mechanism of this staging, the revolutionaries become irreplaceable objects to the guard. The guard is therefore powerless within the law to save the revolutionary, over whose death he must officiate. The scenario reveals mechanics of imperialist nostalgia — love for what you cannot help but destroy — as masochistic for both the colonizer and colonized. The dynamics of masochism — the subject's willing embrace of punishment — puts the power within the incarcerated revolutionaries.

The staging of the scenario as Sue's fantasy facilitates the exhibition and exposure of the violent, persistent scars of the colonial period as pleasure, and allows the homoerotic tension between McKinley and the revolutionaries to be displaced and disavowed. As the opening credits roll, a rock Hindi-language song introduces a collage of photos, images, and book pages from the colonial period, including old film reels of officers beating Indian subjects underscored by a rock beat, eroticizing the colonial violence with a contemporary setting, making it pleasurably modern. The relationship between McKinley and the revolutionaries provides an idealization of the form of that violence and allows it to be renewed in the imagination as triumphant and transcending victimization. Sue's own voyeuristic relationship to the scenario can also be seen in relationship to masochism, as in Kaja Silverman's account of Sigmund Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten," which involves identificatory displacement (160). Silverman describes how the three-phased structure of the female version of the masochistic fantasy depends on a displacement of the beating fantasy from the second phase (I am being beaten by my father), which is repressed, to the third phase (the father is beating the child which I hate). In as much as Sue's position in the story seems to replicate that of the British grandfather in a number of ways, her identification can just as easily be seen as one with the tortured revolutionaries through whom she can receive her grandfather's love and punishment vicariously. Sue's grandfather never seems to mention his family in his diary; rather, the diary depicts his experience with the revolutionaries as the romance of his life. Although the grandfather plot is dropped in the third act of *Rang de Basanti*, Sue's identification with her colonial grandfather and her Indian friends positions her as both the jailer and the jailed. She is shut out of the action in the final part of the film when the students take vigilante action against the state without her knowledge. Her own masochistic fetishism is based on exclusion from the narrative — a perpetual reenactment of her grandfather's loss — in which she can only be a voyeur and consumer in an unfulfilled romance with India and with Daljit.

In one particular scene of the film, we can see that Sue's function is as much a contemporary Western consumer of Bollywood, a sign of its modernity, as a producer of new, more "realistic" Bollywood modes. After a scene of about Daljit's glorious escape from officials through an extravagant motorcycle stunt, the film immediately cuts to the students emerging from a movie theater where they have just viewed a Bollywood movie. As the students sing snippets of the musical numbers, one explains the aesthetics of Bollywood to Sue: "We have trees just to dance around them." However, given the way the film has been edited, the Bollywood film that the students appear to have been watching is the stunt scene of Aamir Khan, the one that Sue has supposedly just filmed. In this way, Mehra collapses Western/Bollywood aesthetics and directorial points of view. Interestingly enough, Sue's own romance is with Daljit, played by Aamir Khan, the character that plays Chandresekhar Azad, the revolutionary that refuses to be caught, unlike Singh who allows himself to be imprisoned. Khan as Azad is depicted as the master of disguises and the escapist. To escape capture, he shoots himself when surrounded by colonial officers. As the big Bollywood star, Amir Khan represents the excessive and escapist cinematic style of Bollywood itself.

Not only does *Rang de Basanti* move back and forth between two plots — the story of Sue's grandfather, a prison guard who witnessed the nationalistic spirit of young revolutions in the 1930s, and the story of the present-day fun-loving students who play the roles of the revolutionaries — the two plots begin to converge when the students begin to take on the role of revolutionaries. With their present-day vigilante acts they rebel against Sue's directorial gaze and more restrained aesthetic (the colonial film is in black-and-white sepia toned with no musical numbers) producing a type of mise-en-

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abyme in which the enactment of the past erupts into present day reality as Bollywood mass spectacle. The students copy Sue's staging to excess, producing an extreme mimicry of the colonial fantasy in Bollywood drag. This restaging works as a form of pastiche prevalent in Bollywood, reenactments of scenes from other popular films from both Hollywood and Bollywood. Propelled into action by the death of Sonia's fiancé, a pilot in the military, Sonia and the young men hatch a plot to shoot the minister of defense in a scene that reproduces the anti-colonial revolutionaries' attempt to kill a British officer to avenge the death of socialist leader, Lala Lajpat Rai. After their actions are mistaken for terrorist attacks, the group decides to occupy All-India Radio by force in order to stage their confessions to the country at large.

"Acting" in Bollywood, then, has ideological real-world effects and actions. Not only do the students become heroic martyrs, inspiring students around the country to speak out against corruption, they also become the literal voice of the state through the nationalized radio system, which ironically has a past history of suppressing Bollywood music for more uplifting classical fare. Despite letting the entire radio staff leave the building unharmed, the students are shot down by a swat team of state police as a split screen depicts events of imperial violence from Sue's documentary mirroring the arbitrary violence of the contemporary Indian nation-state. Modernity becomes figured as various melodramatic iterations of the revolutionary movement during British rule. Sue cannot participate in the drama and romance of the Indian nation-state, partly because she cannot completely parse the melodramatic conventions of Bollywood in time to save her friends and her lover from their spectacular deaths. Globalization produces a spectacle of martyrdom to compete with the specter of violence by the state. While attempting to make clear that the students' actions are justified and not terrorism, the film shows their actions to be on a continuum with contemporary discourses about terrorist actions in cities such as London in which the instigators are Westernized, middle-class youth. The film seems to support the notion that dissidence has to take extreme form in an era of globalization; *Rang de Basanti* offers no "liberal" democratic solutions such as grassroots movements or charity. In this sense, can the realist film — or biopic — actually express the uncertainties attached to arrival, when the nation is both a source of violence and also constantly at threat? By dissolving past and present, *Rang de Basanti* puts colonial acts in a sort of horrific present in which the status of the modern nation-state is in a perpetual state of uncertainty, in the state of always just arriving at the promises of modernity.

In conclusion, we can see the strange consonance between the transnational project of *Rang de Basanti* and of *Slumdog Millionaire*, an "Indian" film by a British director, which has picked up enormous accolades in the U.S., but did not, at first, have similar popularity in India. There, the "reality" it depicts is not perceived as an India that has "arrived" to modernity. If *Rang de Basanti* applies a realistic twist to the Bollywood idiom by introducing a Western character and MTV aesthetics, *Slumdog Millionaire* applies a Bollywood twist to popular western film aesthetics. At the same time, in both *Rang de Basanti*, a fantasy of a Westerner making a Bollywood film and *Slumdog*, a Bollywood type of Hollywood film (despite its British make), "realism," or rather the authentic story of India (colonial history, slum life), is produced by torture — pain inflicted on protagonists by a law that is arbitrary. "Realistic" modes (however "unrealistic") become representative of the real India. Moreover, in both films this transnational real is transmuted and transfigured into mass spectacle. In *Slumdog* there are scenes in which crowds gather and all of India watches the "slumdog" win his million on television — a fantasy where the unknown Indian youth becomes an inspiration to the entire nation. As Soutik Biswas remarks, "I suspect what Boyle tries to do is a Bollywood film — the dirt-poor lost brothers, unrequited love — with dollops of gritty realism. But at the end of it all, it is a pretty callow copy of a genre which only the Indians can make with the élan it deserves" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7843960.stm>). If Bollywood and Indian popular media pushes the conventions of Western to extreme excess producing numerous "bad copies" of various media, what can be said of these new Western quasi-Bollywood films obsessed with both an Orientalist fantasy of a real and mucky India that produces various bad copies — both cool and quaint — of the West? The "real" of *Slumdog* is the real of the globalized media in which "Do You Want to Be a Millionaire?" — strange and familiar — allows the Western audience to identify with a boy from the slums, and offers a fantasy of inclusion that *Rang de Basanti* — with its quasi-terrorists — does not.

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