

To parody a well-known saying, I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it.

—Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.

—Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

one * **FILM POLICY AND FILM AESTHETICS**

AS CULTURAL ARCHIVES

In the 1930s British film journals worried about Hollywood's exploitation of Britain's film market, and Indian film journals complained of the lack of affordable equipment, of exploitative middlemen, and of a need for better stories.¹ Although colonialism was not a preoccupying theme, it was the pervasive condition, as changes in imperial state politics and colonial relations defined the alternatives available to British and Indian film industries confronting obstacles to their development. Everything in British India was under renegotiation: the colony's right to sovereignty, the imperial state's entitlement to colonial resources, the jurisdiction of imperial administrators, and the future of empire. These contests were etched into commercial film-policy debates and film form in both territories. With this opening chapter I look ahead to the rest of the book, and write about how the angels of culture, history, and politics danced upon a pin's head of film-policy semantics and film style.

State Form

In 1932 the British Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, funded by grants from private trusts and local authorities, published the report *The Film in National Life*. The commission had been established at a 1929 conference of “some hundred Educational and Scientific organizations” to examine sound and silent films, and to evaluate cinema as a medium of education, art, and entertainment in Britain.² The report is best known for its recommendations to create a national film institute, which became the template for the British Film Institute, established in 1933. Less known is the fact that the report also contained an assessment of commercial British films in the colonies. Based on its study, *The Film in National Life* concluded that the “responsibility of Great Britain is limited to what, by the production and interchange of its films, she can do in this country. The Colonies are under varying forms of control; and their Governments cannot be expected to take constructive action without a clear and firm lead from the Home [British] Government. There the responsibility of Great Britain is double, for what is done at home and for what is done overseas.”³

The report highlights, in condensed version, three related aspects of the British State’s attitude toward commercial cinema during late empire. In the 1920s and 1930s state-funded committees in Britain, the colonies, and the dominions assessed local film production, transforming a new cultural industry into manageable, organizable data. The desire to influence colonial film industries underwrote these official collations and productions of knowledge about film, which in turn guided the rationalization and regulation of British cinema within the domestic British market. At the same time, colonial and dominion film industries reacted to Britain’s regulatory initiatives with varying degrees of reservation as they asserted their boundaries of cultural sovereignty. In the first part of this book I deal with the parallel operation of such domestic and imperial negotiations, which began in 1927–28 when the British State assessed both the British film industry and the Indian film market, rendering them cognate territories for potential state intervention. Subsequent to its evaluation of Britain’s industry, the state resolved that British film production was a necessary industrial sector for Britain and worthy of measured domestic protection, as provided by the Quota Act (chapter 2). At the same time, the state accepted an evaluation of Indian film as a luxury industry that was best left to its own devices (chapter 3). Here was a linked state apparatus—with the government of India answerable to the British parlia-

ment and the Crown—arriving at opposing definitions of two film industries in relation to their respective domestic markets.

A series of questions become interesting in this context. What kinds of arguments and lobby groups did British film producers utilize to acquire state assistance? Why and on what terms was the Indian film market assessed? Who conducted the investigation in India, and why did the state withdraw from active intervention there? Answers to these questions demonstrate that the state's adjudication of the British film industry as essential and of the Indian film industry as inessential altered the authorized boundaries of state power with regard to cinema in both countries. A liberal state's authority derives in part from its jurisdiction over differentiating between "public" and "private" spheres, "essential" and "tertiary" industries.⁴ Liberal-state rationality or "governmentality" operates through the codification of social and cultural information to generate a legitimate agenda for state intervention or restraint in relation to its populace and their governing institutions. This Foucauldian conceptualization of the state as a collective of practices operationalized through multiple points of attempted and actual regulations frames government and society in mutually constitutive terms.⁵ However, for Foucault the correlative of the state's suasive power is the free (rather than the colonial) subject. Foucault's theory of the liberal state necessarily brushes up against the West's simultaneous application of nonconsensual state power in the colonies to convey the contradictory operations of Western political modernity.

The British State, constitutionally liberal at home but not in its colonies, was an agent of modernization in both domains through the twinned enactment of liberal and imperial policies. Scholarship on the colonial state in anthropology, ethnography, literary studies, and history has long offered evidence of such circuitous historical mappings by studying "the metropole and the colony as a unitary field of analysis."⁶ The virtue of this analysis is that, by shifting attention to the role played by colonies in the definition of a modern British state, it moves beyond orientalist ideas of Britain as the "unconscious tool of history" that brought colonies into modernity and a capitalist trajectory.⁷ The field of cinema studies has remained largely untouched by this work, owing perhaps to the specialized nature of our discipline.⁸ To begin with an analysis of the British State in film history alone, considering the metropole and the colony in conjunction demands several necessary revisions to existing accounts.

First, it points to the need to re-evaluate (direct and indirect) intertwin-

ings of British and colonial film industries in relation to a state that defined its role through presiding over both. Second, an analysis informed by the consonant functions of the state in relation to Britain and its colonies remedies a critical asymmetry. Scholarly discussions have been forthcoming about the impact of decolonization on postcolonial nations but reticent with regard to its significance for the industries and identities of colonizing nation-states. In film studies this has produced a curious lack of dialogue between work on postcolonial national cinemas and European national cinemas, though both have been prolific and productive areas of investigation in themselves. The bulk of available scholarship on Indian cinema focuses on the period following India's independence in 1947, examining the relationship between cinema and national identity or the Indian nation-state. This concentration of work conveys, by its definitional emphasis, the importance of decolonization to the development of a film industry in India. (Unwittingly it also reproduces the "postcolonial misery" of Partha Chatterjee's description, because the study of the region's cinema remains tethered to the end of colonialism as its primary temporal reference point.)⁹ Meanwhile, the significance or insignificance of colonial and dominion markets remains largely uninterrogated by studies that emphasize the centrality of U.S., European, and domestic markets to the industrial strategies of a nation like Britain.¹⁰

Studying British cinema in the late 1920s and 1930s demands an acknowledgment of multiple alterities to engage Britain's extensive territorial reach during its increasing vulnerability to Hollywood. British film policies were defined by a complex set of maneuvers as the imperial nation-state adapted to an environment of colonial/dominion sovereignty, U.S. domination, and domestic factionalization. Similarly, films produced in India responded to Hollywood's cultural and Britain's political supremacy by drawing on variegated commercial, linguistic, and visual influences. By the 1930s, the colony was a center for film production and ancillary film-related businesses. So the third aspect that emerges from a dual assessment of Britain and India is the need to broaden definitions of colonial resistance, looking beyond colonial responses to British and Hollywood films to consider as well what the colony produced under political constraints. The analysis of Britain and India in tandem leads to an account of the colonial state's evaluations of the Indian film industry and simultaneously highlights the Indian film industry's stance toward the state, including the industry's development in the absence of assistance from its government.

As is well documented by scholarship on colonial cinema, the British State

assessed India as a site for censorship.¹¹ Britain also evaluated India as a center for film production and a potential market for British films, which has received scant attention from film scholars. Surprisingly, British evaluations of India were frequently at cross-purposes. Were Indians impressionable natives to be monitored and exposed to edifying images of the West? Were their locally produced films worthy of attention? Were they an untapped market resource to be enticed for Britain's profit? An eloquent expression of this bafflement can be found in *The Film in National Life*, which conveys a firm opinion of cinema's role in an Africa strangely divested of Africans ("In Africa, [film] can aid the missionary, the trader, and the administrator" [137]) but is disjointed when talking about India: "Great Britain owes a duty to the Dominions; the Dominions to Great Britain and to each other; and India owes a duty first to herself. . . . The film can as well display the ancient dignity of the *Mahabharata* as teach the Indian peasant the elements of hygiene and sanitation" (137).

References to educational films mentioned awkwardly alongside productions based on the *Mahabharata*, a Hindu epic that served as a popular source for colonial Indian films, suggest confusion over the role of cinema in a colony with its own popular film production. "India has at once an ancient culture and an illiterate peasantry," notes the report, continuing that the nation is "midway between the two points. She is producing films which are as yet far from good, but which might become works of beauty, while many of her peasantry are as simple and illiterate as African tribes" (126). The "midway" status of India reflected, in some senses, the political liminality of India's position in relation to Britain. Dyarchy had been established in India in 1919, which meant that at the level of the provincial government, power was shared between British agencies and largely elective legislative councils. By the 1920s and 1930s, while India was not quite a colony (the executive body was accountable to the legislature, and the latter had some Indian representation), it was not a dominion either (the most important subjects were reserved for British officials; Indian representation was primarily ceded at the local and provincial rather than the central government, on a controversially communal basis; and the British parliament retained the power to legislate for India). So most British state documents refer to the territory as "the Dominions and India" or "India and the Colonies."¹²

India's own film production and its film industry's discourse from this period offer refreshing alternatives to such mystifications. The record of colonial Indian cinema, though patchy, does not merely replicate imperialist

frameworks of knowledge. To this end, the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) interviews conducted by state representatives in conversation with members of the Indian film industry between 1927 and 1928 make a thrilling document. In lively debate with the state committee on the possibility of granting special preferences for British films in India, vocal Indian film producers, actors, distributors, and exhibitors disabled the premises of the state questionnaire by revealing contradictions in the committee's position. To hear their side of the story, a discussion of Britain and India requires a turn toward Indian films, film journals, newspapers, and state-instituted committees, and an examination of Indian cinema on its own terms (chapters 3 and 7).

The idea of autonomy in cinema or culture is a complex one.¹³ My claim is that nascent institutional forms of the Indian film industry and evolving forms of Indian cinema laid claim to economic and aesthetic autonomy from the state in what were perhaps the most effective ways of resisting the British government, competing with Hollywood film imports, and defining a national imagination. Prem Chowdhry discusses the ways in which defiance of British authority was evident in India's hostile reception of select British and U.S. films. Without denying the significance of such mobilization, it must be acknowledged that Indian cinema's emerging independence at the level of commerce and film content rendered British cinema incontrovertibly ineffectual in the colony.

Of necessity, aspirants of the Indian film industry relied on their own financial resources.¹⁴ Indian film trade organizations emphasized the need for the Indian industry to sustain itself without state support. Speaking at the first Indian Motion Picture Congress (IMPC) in 1939, Chandulal J. Shah, owner of India's Ranjit Studios noted: "It is a tragedy that we the national and nationalist producers are not given any facilities in our country by our own Government and States whereas the British, American, and even German Producers have often been welcomed to make use of everything India possesses. We must end this intolerable situation by our united effort."¹⁵ Baburao Patel, the inimitable editor of *filmindia*, a leading Bombay film magazine, expressed similar sentiments in a characteristically provocative exchange with F. J. Collins, publisher of the rival journal *Motion Picture Magazine*, whom Patel accused of being "a supporter of foreign interests."¹⁶ "The Indian film industry never asked for a Quota Act as the Britishers did against the Americans. People in our industry never worried about the foreign competition however intense it has been. We have always welcomed healthy competition

but we strongly object to the ungrateful and dirty insinuations which the hirelings of these foreign interests have chosen to make against our industry and its men . . . (by) calling the Motion Picture Society of India ‘a self-constituted organization with no credentials.’ ”¹⁷

Despite Patel’s affronted objection, the colonial Indian film industry and its institutions could well have been described as a “self-constituted organization” struggling for credentials. In 1921 the censors endorsed 812 films, of which only 64 were of Indian origin. Over 90 percent of the imported films were from the United States. (According to Indian silent- and early-sound-film director Naval Gandhi, Universal Studios had the largest share in 1927).¹⁸ By 1935 Hollywood and other film imports led by a narrower margin, constituting a little over half of the total feature films screened in India.¹⁹ The 1930s also witnessed the collapse of Madan Theatres, a major importer of U.S. films, and the success of Indian studios, particularly Bombay Talkies and Ranjit Movietone in Bombay, New Theaters in Calcutta, Prabhat in Pune, and United Artists Corporation in Madras.²⁰ Though the studios had mostly disintegrated by the mid-1940s and dominant genres of colonial Indian cinema (including mythological, historical, devotional, and stunt films) had lost their immediate popularity, Indian films had secured a stable domestic status by 1947.²¹ Historians Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy attribute this to the invention of sound, arguing that the Indian filmmaker “now had markets which foreign competitors would find difficult to penetrate. The protection which the Government of India had declined to give him though a quota system had now been conferred by the coming of the spoken word.”²²

To place their observation in a broader context: Indian silent cinema evolved a distinctive visual and performative idiom that was redefined and consolidated with sound and the emergence of film-related businesses (such as film journalism and song-books that bolstered the indigenous star system) to cultivate a strong domestic market for the local product by the 1930s. This was a decade of innovation and experimentation as filmmakers explored local content, learned from European and U.S. film-production techniques, and used their films to implicitly oppose the colonial government. They sought ways to simultaneously combat imports and survive with a foreign power at the nation’s helm. Thus the autonomy that Indian films sought to claim from the state was not absent of a cultural interface with multiple contexts but in fact dependent on it.²³

Tracing links between a film and its multiple formative factors reveals something of a truism: no colonial Indian film is reducible to its nationalist

rhetoric, any more than a British empire film is to its imperialist discourse. An explicitly anticolonial film like *Thyagabhoomi* (Tamil, K. Subrahmanyam, 1939) may be interpreted through alternative determining matrices such as its original author “Kalki” R. Krishnamurthy’s popularity as a Tamil literary figure or its actor Baby Saroja’s rising stardom, both of which contributed to the film’s success in South India. Seeking the various avenues of familiarity between an Indian or a British film and its domestic audience allows us to construct a context for a film’s popularization of nationalist or imperial thematics. In India, for instance, such disparate examples as Zubeida’s success in *Gul-e-Bakavali* (silent, Rathod, 1924) and Nurjehan’s popular rendition of Naushad’s song “Jawaan hai Mohabbat” in *Anmol Ghadi* (Hindi, Mehboob, 1946) fall into a continuum of a new taste-culture manufactured by a film industry that had a more-or-less improvised logic to its organization. Indian cinema fell into an order of pleasure and financial structure that drew both organically and tactically on its cultural distinctiveness. This made Indian protests against British films more a matter of anticolonial political strategy than of necessity. It also made Indian cinema’s relative stylistic and institutional independence a crucial aspect of the colonial phase.

The development of the Indian film industry despite the absence of state assistance—almost outside the comprehension and purview of the imperial state—foreshadowed its postcolonial future. The Indian government constituted in 1947 brought no radical change in policy toward India’s film industry, since assessments of cinema as a luxury item did not alter with independence. On the contrary, India’s new government added state taxes, octroi taxes (for film transportation), mandatory screenings of the government’s Films Division presentations (sold at a stipulated price to commercial exhibitors), and heavy, centralized censorship.²⁴ (Not until May 1998 did the Indian government grant formal industrial status to Indian film and television companies.) None of this is to scandalously suggest that the national government was no different from the colonial one. Certainly, at the level of content, the creation of an Indian nation-state placed different imperatives upon popular Indian films, since representing the nation on celluloid was no longer an allusive, embattled process. Yet for India’s commercial film industry, the period from 1927 to 1947 intimated future governmental attitudes toward popular Indian films and underscored the commercial industry’s need to flourish despite, rather than with, state assistance.²⁵

Colonial India was not alone in its film productivity or in its maneuvers to deflect state interest and inquiry. Britain’s attempts to initiate an imperial

collaboration against Hollywood films were disrupted by other film industries in the empire, which either entered into lucrative arrangements with the United States to assist domestic production (as did Canada) or initiated their own protectionist policies (as did New South Wales). Prior to submitting its report on the Indian film industry to the British government, the ICC examined the film-industry structures of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom in detail, and read the 1927 report of the Royal Commission on the Moving Picture Industry in Australia, a body equivalent to the ICC, which investigated the possibility of a “quota” in Australia.²⁶ Such circuits of communication among state representatives within the empire point to a type of state activity not covered by scholarly work on colonial cinema, which focuses primarily on the repressive imperial state apparatus.

Scholarship on British and Indian cinema in relation to colonial politics can be placed in three general categories: studies that analyze hegemonic versus resistant film reception (covering the jingoistic acceptance of empire films as well as colonial protests against British films, Hollywood films, and colonial censorship); studies that analyze hegemonic and resistant film content (particularly cinematic manifestations of orientalism, racism, and Eurocentrism versus those of hybridity and diaspora); and studies that analyze hegemonic and resistant film production (including educational, documentary, trade, and propaganda films, such as those made by the British Empire Marketing Board; commercial British films about empire from the 1930s; the post-1985 Black British Film Collective; and contemporary politicizations of Britain’s minorities).²⁷ While such oppositions of empire were certainly crucial to popular and official definitions of visual modernity in the metropolis and its colony, just as crucial was the contentiously *shared* space of imperium. Decolonization was a defining matrix for the conduct of state policy in both Britain and India. In internally divided ways, both film industries were caught in dialogic—collaborative and antagonistic—relations with their state. Simultaneous analysis of these industries allows a host of insights: into the subtle ways in which the loss of colonial markets influenced British film regulations; into empire as a material reality for British film producers rather than an exclusively ideological construct in films; into the colonial filmmakers’ claims to autonomy and their critique of imperial bureaucracy that, in turn, influenced British film policy.

Demands for equivalent treatment from colonial and dominion film industries produced distinct shifts in the language of imperial policy, with the British State’s claim to equivalence, distributive justice, and reciprocity in

film policy becoming a necessary device of (self) redemption and (colonial) placation. Shifts in British film-policy semantics, while deceptively small, in fact form a lead to the state's emendation of official definitions of British film in consonance with cultural and political changes within the empire.

Aesthetic Form

Commitment to the arts and political fervor were closely allied in India, and Indian-film historians provide a valuable record of anticolonial campaigns in film journals, film songs that supported Indian independence, nationalist picketing against imported films, and protests against censorship.²⁸ In addition to being reactive, the realms of culture and politics were mutually constitutive. Colonialism was an important limiting and enabling context for the emergence of Indian cinema's thematic concerns and aesthetic modes. Indian films of the 1930s transformed censorship against the depiction of British colonialism into an erasure of colonial history (in mythic narratives) and a displacement of India's present onto a precolonial past (in historical tales).²⁹ British commercial films, as well as Indian productions, variously reinvented their colonial legacy to envision an impending future of radically altered state power, offering an intriguing comparative axis to measure British and Indian film aesthetics in relation to each other.

Contradictory assessments of Britain's colonial past were under way in literature, with popular British fiction on empire defending attitudes parodied within canonized texts of the 1930s. Best-selling English novels by Edgar Wallace, A. E. W. Mason, Rumer Godden, Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling were adapted for the screen, while the more ambivalent, modernist, critically acclaimed counternarratives of empire—including works by Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Somerset Maugham, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Joyce Cary, and Evelyn Waugh—were mostly overlooked by filmmakers and screenwriters.³⁰ Given that, according to the 1927 Quota Act, a film based on *any* original work by a British subject was eligible for quota privileges within Britain, the overwhelming preference for filming pulp and popular fiction about triumphal imperial adventures and the discrepancy between popular and serious literature on empire raise significant questions.

Robust imperial adventures were attractive to filmmakers because they were familiar stories, nationalist in character, spectacularly global in setting, and promised to “lead the exhibitor on to better business—better because bigger, and better because Imperial.”³¹ The film historians Jeffrey Richards

and Marcia Landy argue that because commercial British imperial films were so popular in the United Kingdom and the United States, they cannot be dismissed as having been favored solely by a conservative British minority.³² To pursue their assessment further, empire cinema's apparently pro-imperial ideology and its relationship with potentially anti-imperial literary and political concerns of the period can be engaged by posing the "revulsion" toward empire as a foil against which to assess imperial films.³³ Despite notions to the contrary, empire films were not monolithically ideological; while a certain skepticism and ironic distance may have already entrenched itself between Britain's imperial past and its present in serious literature, such positions were demonstrably *in process* in cinema.³⁴

The forms of empire film texts, much like the negotiations of British film policy, were structurally constituted by the dilemmas of decolonization. Britain's decline in global power had created a series of disturbances: in the position of British industry with regard to imperial and global markets, in Britain's status relative to an international community of nations, and in the internal structures of local British industries. Popular empire cinema in particular was a product of the uneven development of Britain's film production, distribution, and exhibition sectors, and of its film production's subjugation to Hollywood. Put simply, Hollywood's dominance over Britain in combination with the British State's emphasis on the empire as a reinvigorating and exclusive national resource yielded the commercial film industry's investment in imperial spectacles.

The form and content of commercial British cinema—like film policy negotiations, state-sponsored trade films, and documentaries within their specific institutional contexts—exemplified historical upheavals of an empire redrawing its political and industrial boundaries, and restructuring its capitalist base.³⁵ The crises of imperial breakdown, market realignment, and political revalidation strongly influenced commercial and noncommercial films about empire. The Empire Marketing Board (EMB), created in 1926 to revive imperial trade in all products, and the Quota Act of 1927, formed to resuscitate British film production, were both popularly understood to offer a "lead" to the commercial film industry regarding the exploitability of imperial markets and themes "for reasons of the pay-box and patriotism."³⁶ Though EMB films were state-commissioned, connections between EMB and commercial films were more complex than a binary division between state sponsorship and market dependence might suggest. Martin Stollery points out that with the exception of John Grierson, the EMB's creative personnel

August 11, 1927 THE BIOSCOPE SERVICE SUPPLEMENT

FOLLOWING THE E.M.B.'S LEAD

Just now we are witnessing on all sides the efforts of the Empire Marketing Board to further the purchasing of Empire products: a worthy and bold scheme which is capturing the imagination of the ordinary man and woman—who make up the bulk of cinema patronage, we may remark.

It would be a fine thing if the exhibitor could turn to his advantage some of the fruits (no joke is intended) of this national campaign. Though, most unfortunately, films do not come within the ambit of the E.M.B.'s activities, the time is opportune for the big boosting of every Empire-made film—feature and "short"—that the exhibitor shows.

Much more point would be lost to our observations on this subject if Empire pictures were being produced in any quantity—while, regrettably, they are not. But this constitutes no argument against determined exploitation—and general propaganda work—in aid of a cause that is deserving of every support both for reasons of the pay-box and patriotism.

Past Empire-made films have been of a more than satisfactory level of quality and—equally important—drawing power: the best-remembered examples are "King Solomon's Mines," "The Blue Lagoon" and "The Scimitar Blade." These three subjects drew the crowds wherever they were shown, and there is no reason why productions to come should not be equally outstanding successes.

This is not the place to go into the subject of what we believe will prove to be some of the results of the Quota. For the purpose of our article, suffice it to say that it appears probable that the larger American producers will, in forecasting that quality British product must tend gradually to undermine the hold which their films now enjoy on our stage, very wisely enter the production field here, utilizing British talent to give for the films a truly national character.

In such a suppositional time to come, Empire pictures would aid the British renter, who will, we presume, be found to be chiefly interested, and offer the public films which are British—right through. The story values should be notably good, considering that there is a fund of literature and historical material from which to make our own—speaking imperially—epics of colonisation, our own "Birth of a Nation" and "Covered Wagon."

Meanwhile, the E.M.B.'s campaign is the tide which will, if taken at the flood, lead the exhibitor on to better business—better because bigger, and better because Imperial.

August 11th, 1927

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1. It was hoped that the Quota Act, like the E.M.B., would boost empire trade. Courtesy BFI National Library.

were "temporary, non-unionized workers nominally employed by small commercial firms contracted by the EMB and GPO for specific purposes."³⁷ In other words, there was a wide overlap of personnel and perspective between official and commercial productions, and the presence of (or critique of) statist ideology cannot be measured solely by tracing a film's sponsorship and source of funding.

Commercial films about empire were a competitive product serving multiple needs. Consider Alexander Korda's productions like *Sanders of the River* (1935), *Elephant Boy* (1937), *The Drum* (1938), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940), and *The Four Feathers* (1939), which were high-quality productions that succeeded at U.K. and U.S. box offices while also qualifying for national quota privileges.³⁸ Their success benefited the British film producer, renter, and exhibitor, while simultaneously visualizing the redemptive ideals behind empire building. Discussing the EMB's promotion of imperial trade, England's newspaper *The Times* noted in 1934 that words like *empire* "had become tainted by unfortu-

nate associations” until the EMB’s advertising and documentary films “redeemed” empire “by art.”³⁹ British film producers pushing for government support had frequently argued that commercial films could do more for Britain’s imperial standing than state propaganda, because “pictures, in order to attain their object, must not be purely propaganda pictures: they must be of such a kind as to take their place naturally, and by the ordinary commercial method, on the screens of the world and this by reason of their entertainment and dramatic value.”⁴⁰ Commercial filmmakers seeking a regulatory fillip clearly found it advantageous to align their arguments with the state’s interest in reviving Britain’s global image. Jeffrey Richards traces intriguing links between Joseph Ball of the National Publicity Bureau under Neville Chamberlain’s government in 1934 and the filmmakers Alexander Korda, Michael Balcon, and Isidore Ostrer, to suggest that Ball encouraged the commercial producers to invest in salable imperial epics.⁴¹ In addition to fielding direct state pressure, commercial filmmakers had to contend with the effects of a far-reaching official agenda to rehabilitate Britain for a new political environment. By rearticulating Britain’s identity as demonstrably liberal in relation to its imperium, commercial British films participated in the visual and cultural politics of late empire.⁴²

The relationship of culture to its context exists at the ingrained level of form. As Edward Said suggested, one cannot lift an argument from a work of fiction “like a message out of a bottle”; it is inscribed in the architecture of the text’s narrative and images.⁴³ In the British empire films I explore in chapters 4 through 6, the redemptive thematics of late imperialism were enabled by at least three aesthetic forms or imaginative modes, which I characterize as the realist, romance, and modernist modes of imperial cinema. The “imaginative mode,” which I adapt from Peter Brooks’s work on melodrama, refers to a more-or-less internally coherent representational system that facilitated certain accounts of the imperial encounter to retrospectively justify political, social, and racial domination.⁴⁴

Hierarchies between the imperializer and the imperialized are naturalized and reified by the realist mode of commercial empire cinema in films such as *Sanders of the River*, *Rhodes of Africa* (Viertel, 1936), and, with some variation, *Elephant Boy*.⁴⁵ The conflicts of interest between colonizing and colonized nation are acknowledged to a greater degree in the romance mode but are displaced onto symbolic, near-mythic narratives. This can be seen in *The Drum*, *The Four Feathers*, *King Solomon’s Mines* (Stevenson, 1937), and, somewhat anomalously, *The Great Barrier* (Barkas and Rosmer, 1937). The modernist mode of imperial

cinema, though present in the 1940s, appears more frequently after the large-scale decolonizations of the 1950s and 1960s, as with films like *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, 1947), *Heat and Dust* (Ivory, 1983), *A Passage to India* (Lean, 1984), and the television series *The Jewel in the Crown* (Morahan and O'Brien, 1984), as well as films made outside Britain like *Bhowani Junction* (Cukor, 1956) and *The Rains Came* (Brown, 1939), remade as *The Rains of Ranchipur* (Negulesco, 1955). Imperial modernism gives primacy to the crisis of empire under dissolution, but it salvages the breakdown through a sympathetic enactment of Western trauma and by the unifying force of its aesthetic style.⁴⁶ Imperial modernist and, to a lesser extent, romance texts are artistically tormented by their colonial assumptions, whereas a realist imperial text barely acknowledges them. If ideological contradictions between the imperial defense of coercion and liberal celebrations of equality are suppressed in the realist mode and symbolically reconciled within romance, they are interrogated in modernist modes of imperialism.

Despite stylistic differences, all three modes are manifestations of an imperial rhetoric adapting to a more populist, democratic politics. In a circular way, the domestic expansion of Britain's political franchise had been aided by empire: recalling Hannah Arendt, imperialism politically emancipated and organized the bourgeois classes of Britain by drawing them into state politics to protect their economic interests in the colonies.⁴⁷ The evolution of modern state power paralleled the state's management of an ever-broadening mass of citizens and consumers. To offer only a few indexical instances from the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth: British reform bills in 1867 and 1884 increased suffrage, changing the nature of the British Commons; in 1851 visitors of all classes were invited to Britain's Great Exhibition, and in 1857 the South Kensington Museum opened its doors to the general public, including the working classes;⁴⁸ by the early 1900s, demands for better standards of living and equal opportunities dominated the nation's political agenda; and the acts of 1918 and 1928 extended women's franchise. The historical emergence of the masses created modern public (and concomitant private, domestic) spaces through the convergence of an expanding civil society and new technologies of vision, leisure, and consumption, which changed the realms of operation, the preoccupations, and consequently the nature of state disciplinary power. For the British State of the twentieth century, a specter of unpoliced masses and spaces merged the "nightmares of empire" with "the fears of democracy."⁴⁹

The twentieth century marked the emergence of a neocolonial morality

among old imperial states, abetted by international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which were formed as a consequence of the world wars and which allowed for novel modes of control over decolonizing nations by hiding the interests of Western (U.S. and West European) states within measures such as loans, debt structures, and international standards for product quality. All subsequent discourses of power have owed a formative debt to an international morality articulated during the early twentieth century that required relations between (and within) nations to be framed as developmental and consensual rather than exploitative and unilateral.⁵⁰ The aesthetics of late empire connote a poetics of imperial self-representation dispersed over the fields of media, culture, and political rhetoric, shaping notions of power and identity *during and after* the end of formal colonialism. The modes of realism, romance, and modernism represent three recurrent styles of imperial self-representation in a decolonized, democratized world.

U.S. President George W. Bush's arguments for war against Iraq in 2003 recreated a naturalized, realist understanding of U.S. global rights, inflected with the romance of his nation's (or its neoconservative administration's) mission in the world. British Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech to the United States Congress in the same year portrayed the romantic hero's anguish over an imperial commission: "Britain knows, all predominant power seems for a time invincible, but in fact, it is transient. The question is, what do you leave behind? And what you *can* bequeath to this anxious world is the light of liberty."⁵¹ American post-Vietnam films such as *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *Born on the Fourth of July* (Stone, 1989), *Platoon* (Stone, 1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987); Britain's postwar horror films like *The Quatermass Xperiment* (Guest, 1955); Australian "landscape" films like *Walkabout* (Roeg, 1971) and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir, 1975); and debates on racial reparation, all reprised a modernist crisis by interrogating imperial culpability.

Distinguishing a (realist) textual formation that maintains a fiction of ideological unity from (modernist) ones that explore empire's internal inconsistencies throws my reading out of step with influential poststructuralist analyses of colonial discourse, which are invested in the systemic instability of all formal (textual) and formational (epistemic) structures.⁵² The fear of "historylessness: a 'culture' of theory that makes it impossible to give meaning to historical specificity" compels me to distinguish a theorist's deconstructive strategy—through which she finds points from which knowledge

unravels to expose its foundations (or lack thereof)—from a text’s propensity toward such unravelings.⁵³ Through a tripartite systematization of imperial film style, I undertake a cultural and historically immanent reading of form, rather than a formalist reading of culture. I aim to comprehend varied justifications that a nonegalitarian system articulated astride a break between preexisting colonial and nascent neocolonial power-relations. The analysis of form, in this instance, allows history to seep in by reviving the heterogeneity of imperial responses to decolonization.⁵⁴

To comprehend the detailed workings of each mode, I pursue close readings of three British imperial films—one realist, one romance, one modernist—showing that each is an “omnibus” text, borrowing from multiple film genres even while constructing imperial relations through one primary aesthetic lens.⁵⁵ *Sanders of the River* utilizes classical realism as well as the naturalist-realist perspective of colonial and ethnographic cinema, but it deviates from the rules of realism to draw on the “attractions” of a Hollywood western, a musical, and a safari (chapter 4). *The Drum*, like *The Four Feathers*, is an adventure film that uses tropes from melodramas and westerns, though a play with stylistic excesses brings its romantic vision close to the aesthetic of modernism (chapter 5). *Black Narcissus* combines the fantasy genre with melodrama to operate predominantly within the modernist mode, but it may also be read as a corrupted romance narrative (chapter 6). Realist, romance, or modernist modes of imperial representation are “parceled out” among a variety of genres, each carrying a “genre memory” that performs specific political functions for its dominant aesthetic.⁵⁶

The pre-eminence of the western, the documentary, the melodrama, and fantasy (or horror: fantasy’s evil twin) in British empire cinema points to overlapping sympathies in their generic defenses of imperialism. A brief detour through Peter Brooks’s statement on melodrama’s fascination with the social subconscious helps explain the continuum between these genres, when each genre is understood for its labored redress of empire as a democratic form. Brooks notes, “At least from the moment that Diderot praised Richardson for carrying the torch into the cavern, there to discover ‘the hideous Moor’ within us, it has been evident that the uncovering and exploitation of the latent content of mind would bring melodramatic enactment.”⁵⁷ In describing modernism’s desire to reveal the unconscious, Brooks conveys little self-awareness about the features attributed to mind’s internal darkness. The mind, the melodrama, and the “us” are complicitly white, European, and Christian when Brooks imagines a cavern-bound Moor as a fig-

ment of alterity. To paraphrase Brooks, at least from the moment that the “Moor within” became a product of fantasy and source of fear in Western literary texts and critical commentary, it has been evident that Anglo-European exploitations of melodramatic content would be premised on assumptions about their racial, religious, or national others.

Unlike the modernist melodrama described by Brooks, genres operating under the dictates of imperial realism manage variously to split the forces of Self-Other, colonizer-colonized, Christian-Moor, and in so doing control difference. Within realism, violent domination is the only way to democratize the colonized world, which is viewed through Manichean, bipolar divisions. When the generic structures of a documentary, a western, or an adventure tale operate within the realist modes of empire, they reify oppositional principles. When they function as imperial romances, on the other hand, they manage dualities within the more ambiguous realms of myths and symbols. In distinction to both realism and romance, modernist imperial fiction—the most melodramatic of the three modes—holds up a terrifying mirror to Europe, and the hideousness that was safer when attributed to a figure of alterity turns horrific when recognized within. Orientalism and racism lie in the deep structure of empire’s modern melodramas, generating its internal, quiet moments of terror. The modernist optic on empire brings the colonizers and their mental landscape into harsh perspective, drawing attention to their fragmented and fallible subjectivities through style. This display of crisis betrays only the most elusive link to imperial politics, as the chaos of doubt replaces the rational boundaries of realist certitude.

As with most textual depictions of weakness, modernism’s exhibition of imperial vulnerability is gendered, and women frequently bear the burden of representing (and absolving) an imperial nation’s frailties. While male-centered western and adventure genres typically follow realist and romance structures, modernist imperial texts manifest themselves in female-centric melodramas, as in *Black Narcissus* and *Bhowani Junction*. Heterosexual white men in mixed-race homosocial frontiers depict realist visions of vigorous imperial triumph, while modernist imaginings of empire are narrated through white female protagonists undergoing physical or psychic tests in colonies before arriving at deeper, spiritual truths. Effeminized men of color are equally pliant substitutes in modernist narratives, as in the actor Sabu’s American Indian character, Manoel, in *The End of the River* (Twist, 1947), or Robert Adams’s African character, Kisenga, in *Men of Two Worlds* (Dickinson, 1946). Romantic pursuits of imperial missions are suspended some-

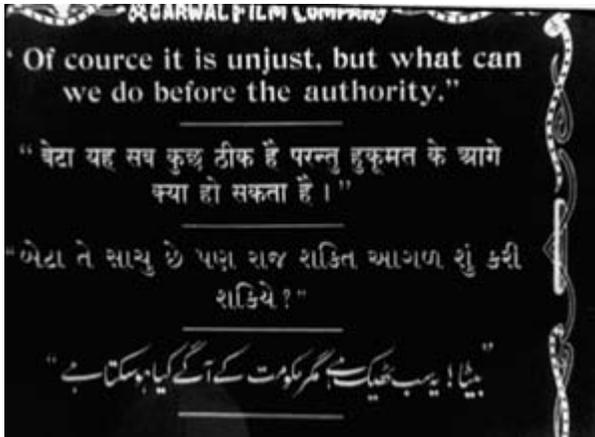
where in the middle, with both male and female protagonists undergoing measured self-exploration before providing salvation to the colony and to themselves.

Assessments of form offer crucial resistance to the banality of ideology-spotting and to the limitations of auteur-driven film criticism by being mindful of the pressures applied to social beliefs not only by directorial but also by the commercial, industrial, and aesthetic compulsions of cinema, while grasping cinema's role in the production of ideology. The categories of imperial realism, romance, and modernism allow an exploration of the filmic medium's specificity, because each mode draws on the cinematic apparatus's reconstitution of time, space, vision, and spectatorship in presenting a specific account of empire. Cinematic stances can be related to neo-imperial (British) or protonational (Indian) cultural vocabularies when a film's aesthetic is understood to mean a film's attitude toward a referent, readable through camera angles, *mise-en-scène*, color, editing, sound, or narrative structure. British empire films typically depict British protagonists working in and withdrawing from colonies, so the primary referents of such narratives are male or female imperial and colonial bodies facilitating imperial labor in a colonial place. Each aesthetic mode reconstitutes this constellation of referents—of gendered bodies, racialized labor, and politicized location—through representational devices such as narrative, image, and sound to produce a particular kind of knowledge about Britain at the end of empire. The three modes may be read, therefore, as epistemic reconstitutions of imperialism (productive of neo-imperial views) through cinema.

In commercially popular empire cinema, locations in India and Africa typically signify "empire."⁵⁸ Consequently, despite my book's overall emphasis on Britain in relation to India, I include an analysis of *Sanders of the River*, a popular British film set in the territory that is present day Nigeria. This inclusion is instructive to my interpretive framework: in the course of my research, I found that the realist mode of Britain's commercial films from the 1930s was reserved almost exclusively for Africa. Since realism is the mode most dependent on the suppression and reification of colonial hierarchies, the fact that it was repeatedly employed with reference to Africa rather than India carries historical significance. Excluding British commercial representations of Africa would be inexcusable in formulating an aesthetic framework for evaluating late British imperial cinema, because stylistic variations imposed on colonial place corresponded closely to political shifts within the imperium. Africa was subjected to a more stringent visual regime of con-

tainment at a time when India was close to independence and considered a bad precedent for Britain's African colonies. In British discussions of African cinema after 1947, India became an unnamable bad ambition with a potential to set off inexpedient aspirations toward nationhood in African colonies. Colin Beale, secretary of the Edinburgh House Bureau for Visual Aids, noted in 1948, "In the re-shaping of the world today the trend of recent events in the Empire is bound to set up aspirations and ambitions which may conflict with plans for African's [sic] ultimate good. How can the film be used to teach the African the need for those qualities of judgment and perseverance—to name two required—with which he can win the best for his people."⁵⁹ Though India, Africa, and in some cases the dominions (like Canada in *The Great Barrier*) functioned as imaginary territories for the production of neo-imperial discourses, there are internal differences in imperial attitudes toward the represented place. My analysis of *Sanders* highlights that film style is notable not only for *how* it visualizes imperialism but also for *who* it utilizes in its representation.⁶⁰

British films with imperial themes increased in the 1930s. In India, however, British empire films were received unfavorably or were subject to severe excisions and withdrawn from exhibition for fear that they would provoke political unrest in a subcontinent that was in the grip of a nationalist movement. At the same time, repressive censorship did not permit the development of an identifiable genre of anticolonial Indian films. Seeking directly oppositional anticolonial Indian films as a contestatory discourse to Britain's empire cinema is a misguided endeavor, because in the face of political prohibitions against overtly antistate representations, Indian cinema's commentary on imperialism was frequently implicit. It was also dispersed across various units of film discourse such as film songs, film dialogues, and film sets.⁶¹ More significant, as Aijaz Ahmad observes in relation to Urdu novels written between 1935 and 1947, subcontinental fiction conducted its nationalist anticolonialism "in the perspective of an even more comprehensive, multi-faceted critique of ourselves: our class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of bodies and sexualities, our idealisms, our silences."⁶² In effect, unlike British fiction, subcontinental fiction was not interested in the "civilizational encounter" between Britain and India; it explored the historical moment as a confrontation with internal solidarities, privations, and alienations. "Anti-imperialism" is a weak analytic category through which to scrutinize colonial cinema, given its ineptness in conceptualizing this dynamic.



2. Anti-imperial sentiment was embedded in several aspects of cinema, as in these intertitles of *Ghulami nu Patan*. Courtesy NFAI.

Films like *Diler Jigar/Gallant Hearts* (silent, Pawar, 1931), *Ghulami nu Patan* (silent, Agarwal, 1931), *Amritmanthan* (Marathi/Hindi, Shantaram, 1934), *Amar Jyoti* (Hindi, Shantaram, 1936), *Pukar* (Urdu, Modi, 1939), *Sikandar* (Urdu, Modi, 1941) and *Manoos/Admi* (Marathi/Hindi, Shantaram, 1939) bear investigation not because they are correspondingly paradigmatic of anti-imperialism, but because they contain a configuration of trends identifiable in pre-independence Indian films (Chapter 7). If British empire films reimagined an imperial nation as a liberal democracy, smoothing out contradictions, Indian cinema defined a civil society in the absence of a sovereign nation-state. In direct contrast to British empire cinema's fantasy of retreat, Indian films invented an identity by the visual reclamation of a homeland. Symbolically transforming the colonial place into a national territory, Indian cinema produced *parallel* aesthetics of realism and modernism. The discussion of realism, romance, or modernism in Indian cinema from the colonial period serves as a pendant to the preceding analysis of British cinema's imperial modes, by revealing the particularity or contextually bounded nature of aesthetic terms, as each mode exemplifies Britain and India's varying responses to decolonization.

As with British empire films, Indian colonial cinema reveals the deeply gendered nature of a nation's imaginary. Where the colonial male is one of the disruptive and controlled subjects of British empire cinema, the colonial female is Indian cinema's subordinated subject, variously and unevenly managed or reworked in each film's representation of a new civil society. Femininity, deployed as a sign of national vulnerability in imperial texts, contrarily

appears as a symbol of nationalist assertion in the colony. Cultural historians of India argue that traditionalism and reform occupied dialectically antagonistic positions in the production of nationalism in colonial India. A primary nexus for the contest between tradition and modernity was the female body, which served as ammunition for the neotraditionalists (who prescribed female behavior through reinterpreted scriptural doctrines to assert national identity) as well as the reformists (whose programs of female emancipation fit Western norms of liberated femininity and frequently served as justification for imperial dominance over a regressive society).⁶³

In her analysis of late-colonial Hindi-language publications that were a key resource for neo-Hindu nationalists in prescribing normative social behavior and sexual propriety, Charu Gupta observes that “women emerged as a powerful means of brahmanical patriarchal attempts to hold power, consolidate social hierarchies and express caste exclusivities.”⁶⁴ At the same time, she notes a rise in Hindi-language women’s journals (*Grihalakshmi*, *Stri Darpan*, *Prabha*, *Chand*) that supported women’s involvement in public activities, emerging alongside an increased awareness of women’s rights and “new ideals of companionate and monogamous marriages.”⁶⁵ Under nationalism, in this instance, two kinds of social reinvention incited each other: one wrought by communal, caste, and class norms of female behavior that used women to consolidate ideas of national identity and cultural purity; the other initiated by a politicization of women as the nation’s modern citizenry.

Existing scholarship focuses on the conflict between colonial India’s communal revivalism and modern reformism as well as their *consonance* in creating a new patriarchy under India’s seemingly secular nationalism, wherein tradition and modernity were made consistent with the nationalist project through the (rhetorical, social, political, communal) subjugation of Indian women. To quote Partha Chatterjee’s well-known argument, “The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, yet entirely legitimate, subordination.”⁶⁶ Arguably, however, Chatterjee’s suggestion that colonial nationalism selectively adapted modernity while carving out a space for cultural sovereignty on the bodies of women overdetermines women’s function in recuperating a patriarchal ideology, rather than thinking of them as stress points for an unstable compound.⁶⁷ Decolonization demanded an all-inclusive definition of political franchise, and even in their most nominal form such incorporations incited anxiety within India’s new

nationalist discourse, bringing the contradictions of modern Indian politics to the fore.

Films from the colonial era disturb rather than reassure prevailing (old or new) patriarchies, by presenting wide-ranging configurations of the female in relation to the new nation's familial, communal, and psychic life. Colonial films rarely appear seamless in their production of a new nationalism, neotraditionalism, or patriarchy, as they write different scripts for women as social subjects. In *Amar Jyoti*, Azad (Hindi, Acharya, 1940), *Chandidas*, *Kunku/Duniya na Mane* (Marathi/Hindi, Shantaram, 1937), *Pukar*, and *Sikandar*, female protagonists are portrayed as willing or unwitting agents who test a man and the laws of his community. In *Amritmanthan*, *Bandhan* (Hindi, Acharya, 1940), *Diler Jigar*, and *Neecha Nagar* (Hindi, Anand, 1946) fictional female characters have to prove themselves worthy of belonging to a future, utopian community with their men. Women move with men in the search for a better community in *Dharti ke Lal* (Hindi, Abbas, 1946) and *Janmabhoomi* (Hindi, Osten, 1936), and they lead men toward a better nation in *Brandychi Batli/Brandy ki Botal* (Marathi/Hindi, Vinayak, 1939), *Diamond Queen* (Hindi, Wadia, 1940), *Thyagabhoomi*, and *Hunterwali* (Hindi, Wadia, 1935). In these narrative variations the films imagine different futures for the nation in relation to its citizens, with women operating as a textual figuration of various unmanaged (political, communal, regional, caste) differences within the nation.

This claim appears to make “woman” into an übercategory of social analysis by subsuming all nationally subordinated communities under the sign of the female, which is not my intention. Insofar as women did not experience their lives irreducibly as a “woman” so much as, say, a middle-class Allahabadi Muslim woman or as a woman from a rural Tamil Thevar family, competing social, regional and religious affiliations extended themselves through gender identity. In this sense, women were in fact one of many constituencies that posed a problem for normative definitions of a secular and inclusive India, all of which constituencies also operated through the category of gender.⁶⁸ Films marked the female body with signs of caste, region, religion, profession—but coded this body as unmarked to signify pan-national universality and appeal—as a precondition to giving it cinematic form. Films thus called forth more than one kind of creative invention in integrating the female into a fictional social totality. Integral to heteronormative commercial cinema's creation of desire and insidiously part of all film narratives, women offer a heuristic means to comprehend a film's labored production of a secular, modern society in relation to its internal differences.

Immediately relevant to a discussion of internal difference is the plight of Indian Muslims from all regions of the colony. As prominent bearers of communal difference in prepartition India, Muslim men and women were sundered by a secularism that included them only on condition of assigning them minority status and a sectarianism that recognized their personhood only on condition of religious, cultural, and political separatism. Indian colonial cinema marks their presence and privations in many ways. Colonial Indian film music is unimaginable without composers like Rafique Ghaznavi, Kamaal Amrohi, Naushad, Ghulam Haider, Khurshed, Nurjehan, and Shamshad Begum. Colonial Indian film genres, texts, music, and scripts were shaped by Muslim artists, several of whom—like Ghaznavi, Haider, Nurjehan, Khurshed, along with the writer Saadat Hasan Manto—left for West Pakistan after partition at incalculable personal cost.⁶⁹ More profoundly, as Mukul Kesavan proposes, “Islamicate forms” constituted and gave shape to India’s cinematic imagination.⁷⁰ Ghazals, Muslim socials, “Urdu, Awadh, and the *tawaif* have been instrumental in shaping Hindi cinema as a whole—not just some ‘Muslim’ component in it.”⁷¹

If the colonial film form absorbed Islamic culture, it also internalized a deep apprehension about inassimilable internal heterogeneities that, on the political front, potently manifested itself in the conflict between Indian Hindus and Muslims. Similar to British imperial modernism’s transmutation of an anxiety of decolonization into introspective and stylized intimations of disaster, Indian colonial films hint at the inadequacies of a secular imagination. An unnamed dread of a nation that may not cohere lurks behind colonial film texts. A rare film like *Shejari/Padosi* explicitly enunciates a fear of disunity. More often, films released around the time of independence, like P. L. Santoshi’s *Hum Ek Hain* (1946), tutor the nation on national integration (which *Shejari* does as well). But all colonial films offer their particular genre-refracted representation of India’s “social problems” (similar to those predicted by *Chandidas* and Churchill). Films that appear on surface to celebrate Indian nationalism remain haunted by the consequences of political sovereignty. They repeatedly give cinematic form to the afflictions of modern Indian society in order to suggest utopian resolutions; afflictions imagined as an excess of conservative traditionalism and reactionary religiosity or, on the contrary, as a surfeit of scandalous modernity.

With regard to the female figure in colonial cinema, realist “socials” that depict contemporary India—*Chandidas*, *Janmabhoomi*, *Thyagabhoomi*, *Bandhan*, *Azad*—aesthetically integrate women into what Aamir Mufti calls the “af-

fective economy of nationalism.”⁷² Reminiscent of Chatterjee’s argument, such tales of social reform imagine contemporary Indian social problems like casteism, rural underdevelopment, alcoholism, and the denudation of tradition and family values under corrupting Western modernity, and invariably subsume female emancipation within resolutions that affirm a new reformist and nationalist patriarchy. At the same time, historical romance films (like *Diler Jigar*, *Ghulami nu Patan*, *Pukar*, and *Sikandar*) and modernist myths (like *Amar Jyoti* and *Amritmanthan*) depict women who pose a challenge to India’s emerging nationhood through aesthetic templates that oppose the realist mode of socials, always understanding realism in the revised terms of Indian cinema (chapter 7). Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that colonial nationalism produced the assertive and didactic mode of realism.⁷³ But as a political movement that sorted a heterogeneous population into internal majorities and subservient minorities to invent a national totality, colonial nationalism also produced the exploratory, interrogative, and traumatized mode of modernism by pointing to the potential impossibility of a unified “India.” Expressions of such skepticism can be read in film form, agitated around the figure of the female in historical romances and modernist myths in particular.

As a cultural form, colonial cinema grappled with the possibility of a modern India through stories told as myths, as feudal precolonial histories, and as contemporary socials. The structure of their fiction was contingent on finding a place for decolonizing subjects within these inventions. And so the films repositioned the nation’s internal subjects to imagine a community and assess the past with varying degrees of confidence about a new era in politics. As a commercial commodity, these articulated visions needed an audience. Similar to British empire cinema, Indian colonial films were in competition with other film imports within their domestic market. They drew on a range of artistic influences—Hollywood’s popular film genres, Europe’s art cinemas, Britain’s novelistic and dramatic traditions, Indian classical and vernacular forms of visibility and performativity—to reconfigure cosmopolitan and local styles and present a formally hybrid cinematic vision of alternative sovereignty. The difficulties in nationalism’s assimilationist project produced the narrative and visual obstacles of colonial films, which were either polemic and pedagogical in their nationalism or deeply prophetic of a nation’s unattainable ideals.

Gayatri Spivak has demanded that efforts to historicize formalism make transparent their “ethico-political” agendas. Examining preeminent descriptions of postmodernism by Jameson, Lyotard, and Habermas, she argues that

they assign the status of “cultural dominant” to limited, Eurocentric manifestations of late capitalism, which when extrapolated into the next new universal historical narrative effectively repress heterogenities across place and continuities over time.⁷⁴ To be fair, Jameson is only too conscious of history’s agenda; in his words “Only a genuine philosophy of history is capable of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms . . . with those of the present day.”⁷⁵ But as Spivak deconstructs a critic’s location during the act of interpretation, Jameson’s formal ontologies to interpret social texts based on buried (unconscious) structures appear to invest too much authority in the scholarly interpreter, and by extension in the interpreter’s Eurocentric epistemology. Though I assume a similar risk by making texts and contexts speak through my theoretical constructs (as does any writer), my effort is to link form and history in a manner that actively resists universalization as well as notions of complete temporal rupture. My attempt to localize the aesthetics of realism, romance, and modernism in cinema owes a debt to the larger project of “provincializing Europe,” to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty.⁷⁶ My claim, quite simply, is that cinematic realism, romance, and modernism each provided a visual and thematic regimen for the political upheavals in Britain and India, in ways expressive of the contests within and pressures upon those two entities confronting a new identity and relationship, a new destiny.

