Love and Longing for Mumbai
Vikram Chandra’s Fiction and Bollywood Cinema

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Introducing the Cinematic Diaspora

In a recent article, Vikram Chandra discussed the influence of Bollywood cinema on his fiction, particularly in relation to Sacred Games (2006):

Film has quite profoundly influenced the way I tend to think and imagine. It was a large part of my imagining of this book [...] And I knew right from the beginning that the Hindi cinema was going to play a large role.¹

Chandra believes that Bollywood, as part of a global cultural flow, shapes the very perception of reality:

We’re so surrounded by fiction, and then when it actually happens, we can’t really understand it as reality [...] I got interested in that interplay between this media-saturated world that we live in and our sense of our own reality – how we construct reality and how we resist reality sometimes because we’re so used to fiction.²

Here Chandra discusses the connection between the representation of reality proposed in cinema and its impact on fictionality. Chandra agrees on the primacy of collective belonging fostered by Bollywood, partly because his career has been shaped by it. Chandra, born in New Delhi and now shuttling between Berkeley and Mumbai, has constantly been immersed in cinematic

² Wiehradt, “An Interview with Vikram Chandra.”
culture. His mother, Kamna Chandra, has scripted numerous films (among the most popular are *Prem Rog* and *1942: A Love Story*). Both of his sisters, Tanuja Chandra and Anupama Chopra, the latter the wife of the popular Indian director Vinod Chopra, are respectively a film director and a film critic. After graduating from Pomona College, Chandra enrolled on an MA course in film studies at Columbia University, abandoning it half-way through to become a writer.

Chandra’s career and his writing testify to the centrality of Bollywood cinema for the members of the South Asian diaspora. In his short-story collection *Love and Longing in Bombay*, film represents a visual archive to re-create the homeland, and posits itself as the epitome of India’s transnational character. I will now contextualize this assertion in order to establish the foundational basis for the arguments I intend to propose in this essay.

Jigna Desai maintains that film represents the most popular and significant cultural form within the transnational South Asian economy. Vijay Mishra argues that Bollywood represents the “temples of desire of modern India.” The connection between cinemas and temples refers to their connotation of places of communal gathering where people admire/worship characters whose behaviour continues to constitute a model of conduct for the collectivity. However, by employing the adjective ‘modern’, Mishra conflates the idea of modernity with modernization, and points to the specific reception such films have among the Indian populace. Mishra contextualizes his assertion in the theoretical background of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” where the collapse of the aura – the specificity of the artwork – brings a democratization of art and culture. Analogously, Mishra argues that if the Hindi movie used to represent specific middle-class tastes and was exclusively elitist, today it embodies the desires of all of modern India; it has lost its aura by becoming more accessible.

Mishra argues that the representation of collective desires coincides with the discourse propagated by the nation’s rulers. The victory of the PJP in the 1998 general election opened a new era of modernization, with a visible shift towards an economic liberalism, which forged the idea of the country as a modern super-power, as a global and transnational nodal point. This image is

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