



Producing **BOLLYWOOD**

INSIDE THE CONTEMPORARY
HINDI FILM INDUSTRY

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From Slumdogs to Millionaires

The Gentrification of Hindi Cinema

“With the multiplexes, seeing a movie has become an elite affair.” In December 2005 I was standing in the Soho branch of Chanel with Asha Mehta, a Hindi film actress who was visiting New York City with her boyfriend, director Tarun Kumar, whom I had known since 1996.¹ The three of us had met for lunch nearby and were strolling through the neighborhood when Mehta spotted the Chanel store and decided to check out their handbags. While Kumar was paying for the purchase, a purse with a price tag greater than my monthly rent, Mehta was discussing what she felt was a drastic change in the social status of Hindi cinema: “Before, the elite didn’t watch, or they said they didn’t watch, even if they did, because they looked down upon it. But now Hindi movies are stylish and cool; Bollywood is everywhere—even in the discos.”

Over the years, I had been hearing some variation of Mehta’s assertion—that Hindi films had become “cool”—from a number of people associated with the Bombay film industry. During my first stint of fieldwork in 1996, when I interviewed Bhawana Somaya, the editor of *G*—a glossy, English-language film magazine—she related how her teenage nieces had informed her, “By the way, Hindi film is in now; it was out earlier.” In 2006, during my last research trip to Bombay, Shravan Shroff, the thirty-something CEO of a national chain of multiplex theaters, asserted during our interview, “I think Hindi films are very cool now,”

while Nester D'Souza, the manager of the erstwhile Metro Cinema declared, "It's no longer uncool to be seeing a Hindi film."

Implicit in the deployment of cool as a category is its opposite or other—a period when such a desired status for Hindi films had not been achieved—as Shroff elaborated upon in his assertion, "Earlier it used to be uncool to see Hindi movies. During my school days, when I had to tell somebody that my father has something to do with the film industry, I couldn't say it because people thought that it was really stupid. How can you have anything to do with the Indian film industry? And we guys grew up on Hollywood films and aping films like *Top Gun*, etc." By stating that he grew up with Hollywood films, Shroff indirectly communicated his elite class position, since the circulation and presence of such films prior to the mid-1990s was very limited in India.² Additionally, India is one of the few countries in the world where locally produced content is predominant: even with the greater presence of Hollywood films, foreign content comprises only about 5 percent of total screen time (Kheterpal 2005). Despite being the third generation of his family to be involved with the business side of filmmaking, Shroff's earlier disavowal of Hindi films and filmmaking positions him within a very specific and circumscribed class fragment of Indian society—the elite who, according to Mehta, looked down upon Hindi cinema.³ The present for Shroff is marked not by shame and repudiation, however, but by pride and acceptance, which he attributes to the improved quality of films:

I think the kids today ape Shah Rukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan and I think it's really cool to be associated with Indian films. And the quality of Indian films has gone through the roof, so today, you know, I have no qualms in admitting to the world that I work in the Indian film industry. I think it's really cool because people look up to it and say, "Wow, that's such a fantastic job." You know, twenty years back when I was in school, people used to snigger and I used to feel really foolish telling people that my father has something to do with the Indian film industry. So it's been a total change. (Shravan Shroff, interview, May 2006)

Not only do Shroff's statements represent the disdain that Hindi filmmakers have historically expressed toward their own practice, but they also reveal the tremendous concern for acceptance by individuals who filmmakers regard as their social peers, but not as their typical audience. Shroff's allusion to the "kids today" who "ape" leading actors Shah Rukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan is not a comment about the newfound popu-

larity of Hindi film stars (who have always commanded tremendous fan followings), but about the popularity of such stars among a small social fraction who, from Shroff's perspective, would have never been fans during his youth.

Thus, from the perspective of the Hindi film industry, "cool" is an attribute that includes films, filmmakers, and audiences. When used as an adjective to describe Hindi films, cool signifies a general state of improvement marked by higher production values as well as a visual style and narrative content that is coded as modern and sophisticated. From Mehta's statements, it is apparent that cool also refers to the open and acknowledged consumption of Hindi films by socially elite audiences and to the circulation of these films in spaces marked as upscale. Finally, as apparent from Shroff's remarks, cool denotes a self-confidence among filmmakers where they are not embarrassed or apologetic about filmmaking and the film industry; therefore, "cool" is a polysemic category that encompasses aesthetics, affect, social class, identity, and subjectivity.⁴

In this chapter, I examine the film industry's discourses of quality and change—indexed by such declarations of Hindi films' newfound coolness—in order to illustrate the connections between the sentiment of disdain, the category of coolness, the process of gentrification, and the construction of Hindi filmmakers' subjectivities, specifically their sense of self and relationship to the larger world (Holland and Leander 2004). Hindi cinema's social transformation or path to "coolness," often lauded by filmmakers and journalists, began in the mid-1990s with the erasure of the signs and symbols of poverty, labor, and rural life from films, and with the decline in plots that focused on class conflict, social injustice, and youthful rebellion. While journalists, filmmakers, and scholars attribute the narrative and aesthetic changes that I label as gentrification to changes in audience demographics (Deshpande 2005; Inden 1999; Joseph 2000b), I argue that filmmakers' own subjectivities, generational status, and class backgrounds play an important role in these transformations. Filmmakers' explanations for the aesthetic qualities of mainstream Hindi cinema and their narratives of change and progress display concerns about social status, cultural identity, and modernity.

Nonetheless, filmmakers' characterizations also reveal how audiences are centrally implicated in their evaluative discourses about Hindi cinema, as commercial filmmaking is a complex intersubjective enterprise, where audiences comprise the "significant others" (Mead 1934) who help to define filmmakers' subjectivities as cultural producers.⁵ While the constitution of the subjectivity of a self-identified commercial filmmaker—one

who makes films for audiences who number in the millions (or billions)—like other instances of self-making, is dialogical, social, and dependent upon the interactions with others (Kondo 1990; Mead 1934; Taylor 1992), these others—in the case of Hindi filmmakers—are not actually observable people, but imagined interlocutors (McQuail 1997: 112). All of the remarks at the opening of this chapter demonstrate the existence of imagined interlocutors—and arbiters of taste—whose consumption of Hindi films have accorded them an upgraded status. If certain imagined audiences have elevated the reputation of Hindi cinema, others are held responsible for the opposite, and this chapter explores the discourse of quality, mediated through the figure of the audience. The final significant element in the discussion about cinematic quality and filmmaker subjectivity is the role of technology, specifically the agentive character attributed to video, satellite, and the multiplex theater for precipitating changes in films, audiences, and filmmakers; therefore, in filmmakers' discourses, both audiences and technology operate as significant agents in the transformations of Hindi cinema; I illustrate how they both serve to mediate filmmakers' presentation and representation of their selves.

This chapter is organized into three main sections, corresponding to filmmakers' narratives of change and temporality regarding the quality and status of Hindi cinema. I begin with filmmakers' criticisms of filmmaking in the 1980s—a decade that was emblematic of Hindi cinema's uncool past. While filmmakers cite the arrival of video as the catalyst for the decline in cinematic quality, I reveal how such evaluations of quality are connected to the imagined audience for Hindi cinema in the 1980s. I discuss filmmakers' ambivalence toward these audiences and the manner in which they distanced themselves from them as a self-defining activity. In the second section, I detail the discourse of improvement that begins in the mid-1990s, which is mostly pegged to the arrival of satellite television and the changing class composition of film audiences. I outline the significance of certain features of the social world of filmmakers, however—specifically generational identity, class background, and personal taste—in order to understand the changes that enabled Hindi films to be considered cool a decade later. Finally, I discuss the impact of the multiplex theater and its role in producing a new generic category in relation to cinema and a social category with respect to audiences. Additionally, I address how this particular technological innovation is invested with tremendous liberatory and artistic potential by filmmakers, which enables them at last to make the films that they want.

THE ANTITHESIS OF COOL, AKA THE '80S

The Era of Video and Trashy Cinema

During many of my conversations and interviews with filmmakers, the 1980s emerged as a particularly dreadful period of filmmaking, in contrast with both earlier and later periods of Hindi cinema. Aamir Khan—one of the most successful actors in the industry who produced the internationally celebrated *Lagaan* (Land Tax) in 2001, and then made his directorial debut with the critically acclaimed *Taare Zameen Par* (Stars on this Earth) in 2007—asserted vociferously, “[the] ’80s, I believe, was the worst period of Indian cinema. The number of films which were trashy were unbelievable, and I as an audience was, you know, really shocked!” He related that, as a teenager watching films, during this period he was extremely disappointed by the kind of films being made, which he described as “horrible.” When I asked him what was horrible about the films, he exclaimed, “What was not horrible? That would be easy to answer. They didn’t have good stories; they didn’t have good music; they didn’t have good lyrics; the performances were loud; and the scenes were horrible; and nothing was nice about them! They were just trashy—the right word for them is trashy. Ridiculous films were being made. Very few of them were nice. You could really count the number of films in the year, which were decent and, you know, worthy of viewing, and that also reflected in the [box-office] collections because the collections started dropping” (Aamir Khan, interview, March 1996). Other filmmakers mentioned clichéd plots and dialogues, excessive violence, garish sets, and vulgar choreography as further illustrations of the decline in cinematic quality by the mid- to late 1980s. One of the most successful and influential producer/directors in the contemporary industry, Karan Johar, attributed the degeneration in filmmaking to the general social malaise of the decade where, in his words, “nothing happened either in society or in politics.” Johar’s comments were made to a group of NYU faculty (including me) and graduate students who had the opportunity to visit his film shoot in *Sleepy Hollow*, New York, in November 2005.⁶ He continued by asserting that “kitsch” did not exist in “Bollywood” until the “South Indian invasion” during the 1980s “when everyone was dancing on pots, pans, utensils, and suddenly, hundreds of dancers are dancing behind the main pair.”⁷

What Johar was referring to was a phase in the Bombay industry, starting in 1983, when a number of Hindi films were produced and directed by filmmakers from the Telugu and Tamil-language film industries, most

frequently starring the southern actresses, Sri Devi or Jaya Prada, with the Bombay star, Jeetendra.⁸ These films exhibited a style of choreography that was frequently derided by the press at the time as calisthenics, and a visual style described as kitschy. During my fieldwork in 1996, I encountered a curious ambivalence among Hindi filmmakers regarding the southern Indian film industries: while the Telugu and Tamil film industries were often described as more efficient, disciplined, and organized than the Bombay industry, and certain directors, actors, and technicians were held in highest regard, lauded as innovative path breakers,⁹ the overall characterization of South Indian cinema (referred to as a collective rather than by the individual language cinemas) was not very flattering. Everything was described as more excessive than in Hindi films: the visual style more garish, the women heavier-set, the humor cruder, and the drama louder.¹⁰

The dominant explanation for the "horrible" '80s had less to do with the influence of South Indian cinema, however, and more to do with the introduction of videocassette technology and its concomitant problems of video piracy and changes in the patterns of film consumption. Home videocassette recorders began to be imported into India in 1982, when the Indian government relaxed import restrictions for VCRs and color television sets for a short period before the ASIAD games, which took place in New Delhi in November of that year.¹¹ An estimated one million color television sets were imported as a result of this policy change, with the total number of sets in India increasing from five thousand to five million in less than two years (Pendakur 1989). While the number of videocassette recorders imported was lower, the impact on the Hindi film industry was noticeable by the fact that references to the "video menace" started appearing in the film trade press by early 1982. For example, the trade magazine *Film Information*, dated April 10, 1982, reported that at least a thousand pirated videos of the film *Desh Premee* were circulating in Bombay prior to the film's release on April 23, thereby cutting into the film's potential business ("The Real Stab" 2007 [1982]: 23).

Initially, filmmakers only sold video rights for overseas distribution and did not entertain the option of domestic video rights, in a futile attempt to stave off competition from the new medium.¹² Videos of Hindi films were openly screened in a variety of public venues, however, such as hotels, restaurants, cafés, and long-distance buses. Emerging in 1983 and spreading rapidly throughout India, the video parlor (or video theater) was the one institution that caused the greatest anxiety for the film industry: it was a simple hall with a television and a VCR, seating any-

where from 50 to 100 people (Pendakur 1989), who could watch several films on video at a fraction of the cost of movie theaters. Producers and distributors did not realize any revenues from these screenings and kept pressing lawmakers to crack down on them. Trade magazines like *Film Information*, in the period from 1982 to 1984, were filled with filmmakers' outrage about the open sale, circulation, and screening of Hindi films on video, reminding readers that such circulations were illegal.

Social Class and Cinematic Quality

While the economic impact of video on the theatrical exhibition sector is evident, how did the advent of video result in a decline in cinematic standards or in Khan's words, "trashy" films? What was it about video that engendered poor filmmaking? It is in this realm of explanation where the discussion of cinematic quality really becomes a discourse about audiences and a commentary on class, and the trashy "'80s" actually span a period from about 1985 to 1994. Filmmakers and the English-language press in India laid the blame squarely on the changing class composition of audiences frequenting theaters.¹³ In response to my question about the changes that he had witnessed over time in filmmaking, Ramesh Sippy—the director of *Sholay* (Flames, 1975), one of the most successful and iconic Indian films of all time—presented a narrative of decline mediated through technology and class. Speaking about the impact of VCR technology, Sippy said, "Besides losing revenue, the type of audiences began to change very drastically. The upper classes completely skipped cinema, and as television sets became cheaper, and video came in more, you found the middle classes disappearing. So what you had left was the common man from the lower classes." With the VCR leading to an upper- and middle-class "flight" from movie theaters, leaving only the lower classes as the ticket-buying public, the quality of filmmaking began to suffer, according to Sippy, "So it was a vicious circle. Films started to deteriorate in their content because they had to appeal to the lowest denominator, which meant much more basic kind of films—crude films, action, thrills, a crude kind of romance—which drove even the occasional viewer from the other classes further away. If he wanted to think once in a while to go and see a film, then he went and saw it and considered it all crap and just couldn't go back" (Ramesh Sippy, interview, 25 April 1996). In Sippy's remarks, we see the connections asserted between audiences, their class position, and cinematic quality. His assertion that lower class taste in cinema was abhorrent to viewers from more elite backgrounds has been a longstanding feature of the discourse about audiences, so-

cial class, and taste generated by the film industry and English-language media in India.

In fact, even prior to my fieldwork I had encountered Sippy's narrative in articles appearing in prominent nationally circulated English-language news magazines. For example, *India Today's* cover story, "Cinema Turns Sexy: Films become increasingly raunchy, ribald and explicit," from November 15, 1991, begins by quoting various members of the Hindi film industry expressing their displeasure with the state of filmmaking, and then offers its explanation: "Cinema is the moving mirror of the times, and they have changed. The biggest shift has been in the composition of the audience in cinema halls. The frontbenchers—those who go to whistle and leer at double entendres and bare skins—now extend to the dress gallery [the most expensive seats in a movie theater], while the more genteel folk stay home and watch video . . . the halls are now overflowing with young men who want something new, exciting, and fast-paced" (Jain 1991: 28–29). "Front-bencher" is a specific audience category used by the film industry and the press to describe viewers who sit in the cheapest seats, which happen to be in the very front of a movie theater. As a shorthand reference to poor male viewers, the category is highly pejorative and, apparent from the above description, suffused with assumptions about the links between class, gender, age, and taste in films and behavior in theaters. Filmmakers and journalists perceive and represent poor young men as having the most prurient tastes in cinema—in complete opposition—and the most distasteful—to elite audiences.

The idea that the movie theaters were filled with "front-benchers," whose tastes are diametrically opposed to "more genteel" audiences, was the subject of the cover story, "The goonda as hero," for the February 16, 1992, issue of *Sunday* which had as its subheading, "Hindi films move away from middle-class values and cater to front-benchers" (Khanna and Dutt 1992: 63). The authors argued that since middle-class audiences stopped patronizing movie theaters, fewer films were being made that targeted their tastes and sensibilities. Producer and lyricist Amit Khanna explains: "Audiences in movie halls comprise urban lumpen youth. Since the returns from video and cable are not commensurate with the returns from the box-office, today's films are by and large being made for the front-bencher—the guy who lives in Dharavi and is only too aware of the breakdown of the system" (Khanna and Dutt 1992: 64).

The article also featured an extended discussion about the box-office failure of *Lamhe* (Moments) that further illuminated perceptions in the film industry about audience expectations and taste being based on class

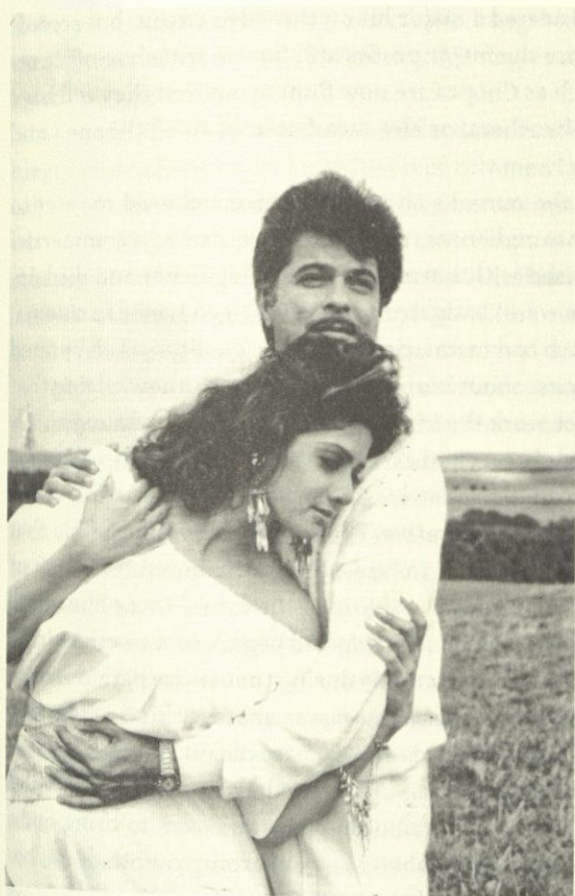


FIGURE 1 Anil Kapoor and Sri Devi in *Lamhe*. Courtesy and copyright of Yash Raj Films, www.yashrajfilms.com.

distinctions (Figure 1). *Lamhe* was released in November 1991 and continued to have a rich discursive presence over the course of my fieldwork—from five to fifteen years after its release. The film represented a love triangle of sorts—spanning two generations and two continents—set amidst an extremely elite social world where the protagonists lived in palatial homes both in Rajasthan and England. It was a highly anticipated film by producer/director Yash Chopra, whose previous film had been a huge commercial success, so its disappointing performance at the box-office was described as “one of the biggest shocks of recent times.”¹⁴ Rauf Ahmed, the editor of *Filmfare*, a leading English-language film magazine, offered an explanation for *Lamhe*’s failure, “Everyone in *Lamhe* just talks and talks and talks. The front-benchers, who are the only people in the cinema halls today, don’t have the patience for so much dialogue” (Khanna and Dutt 1992: 68). Though categorized as a flop at the box-

office, *Lamhe* was considered a major hit on the video circuit, but according to the article, "Since the major profits still flow in from box-office returns, filmmakers such as Chopra are now finding out that they will have to cater to the front-benchers, or else face financial ruin" (Khanna and Dutt 1992: 69).

As apparent from the remarks above, this perceived need to cater to poor and working-class audiences, though represented as a commercial imperative, was suffused with normative value judgments and disdain, where such audiences were castigated for their alleged tastes in cinema. The direct effect of such bad taste upon cinematic quality was elaborated by Sippy, who was honest about his own filmmaking, acknowledging that he did not do his best work during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although Sippy asserted that a good director should not make excuses for his mistakes, his explanations for his filmmaking in this period relied heavily on the degeneration narrative. Discussing a few films of his that were both box-office and critical failures, Sippy attributed their lack of success to the general commercial scenario of the time: "These films were made in a period where the video invasion had begun, so we were losing a lot of the discerning audiences. Actually during that entire period we will not find very many great box-office successes, whatever kind of film you made. The standards fell all around—no excuses meant here—but when the returns are not there at the box-office you do get disturbed. After all you owe responsibility to the distributors and financiers to bring out a product that makes money. So you had to start curbing your budgets, because the returns were not really there at the box-office." Sippy's distress at the poor box-office outcome of his films and his subsequent measures to ameliorate the situation is not presented as a simple commercial decision, but one that crucially reshaped his filmmaking practice: "You start curbing budgets; somewhere you start restricting your area of thinking; because before, my way of thinking always was, 'Don't talk to me about budgets, I just want to make the film that's got to be made.' After that I started to think that the budget is important, and it's got to be kept in mind. So maybe I started mentally, sort of, drifting into that trap, and probably at the same time subjects that were picked on were not as nice . . . so everything seemed to be working the wrong way around" (Ramesh Sippy, interview, 8 July 1996). Sippy's reflexivity about this period, along with his own representation of his internalization of the constraints imposed by the changing technological and economic landscape for filmmaking, is an example of how the subjectivity of a commercial filmmaker

is forged in concert with figures of the imagined audience, mediated through box-office returns and new technologies of distribution such as video.

Although the above discussion of the deterioration of cinema thus far hinges centrally on an interpretation of commercial outcome, box-office collections in India are not the objective, transparent indices of audience demographics or behavior that they are purported to be. Given the absence of empirical data and the lack of verifiable systems for collecting information about the demographics of film viewership, filmmakers' and journalists' pronouncements about certain categories of audiences and cinematic standards should not be taken as statements of some empirically observable reality; instead, they throw into relief attitudes held by media practitioners (film and print) about age, gender, class, and the public consumption of films. A dominant assumption of this discussion is that sex and violence are synonymous with lower standards and poorer quality. This discourse sets up opposing categories of "middle classes" and "masses/front-benchers," which have different values arising from differing material conditions, resulting in differing aesthetic standards and cinematic tastes. The much-maligned front-benchers are young, poor males who see movies in theaters and are represented in this discourse as vulgar, prurient, violent, and profane. They are this way because the movies they allegedly enjoy watching repeatedly—making them box-office hits—are characterized as having the same qualities. Due to the sheer numbers of front-benchers, filmmakers have no choice but to cater to their degenerate taste, thus positing the "masses" as the root of the "decline" in Hindi cinema.

In this schema, the middle classes—"genteel" and watching films on video in the privacy of their homes—due to their different morals and values, have distinct cinematic preferences and aesthetic standards, characterized by their dislike of the films that front-benchers enjoy. The depiction of the increasingly mass nature of film as an adulteration of a middle-class standard is present even in academic treatments of Indian film history. Scholars present a narrative where, since Independence in 1947, the Hindi film industry, which had grown and changed in response to an influx of illegal profits from the Second World War, extended beyond its educated middle-class audience of prewar days to a new mass audience of uprooted peasants "confronting the unsettling realities of urban and industrial life" (Binford 1989: 80). The growth of this audience in the urban landscape precipitated what Ashis Nandy characterized as

"the expansion of low-brow mass culture" (Nandy 1987). The movie theater can be said to have become a primary locus of this "low-brow" culture, as the middle classes did not frequent it anymore.

Common and Unfashionable Entertainment

I contend that the dominant association between mainstream Hindi cinema and the masses—firmly established by film scholars, filmmakers, and the English-language press—was the root cause for Hindi films not being considered cool or fashionable for such a long period. Shah Rukh Khan mentioned during our interview how he too at one time did not consider it "fashionable" to like mainstream Hindi films, instead preferring Hollywood films, which were considered more fashionable. Describing Hindi cinema as "pure, *masala* entertainment," "a modern form of *nautanki*," and a "modern form of street theater," Khan explained that the main audiences for Hindi films were those that, because of their limited economic means, had no other options for entertainment.¹⁵ Although he did not use the terms "masses," or the "common man," his description of the target audience for Hindi cinema alludes to these concepts.

Khan's explanation for why Hindi films were an object of distaste and condescension by social elites is remarkably evocative of Bourdieu's arguments about class, taste, and the practice of distinction (1984). He surmised that expressing a distaste for Hindi cinema was a way to communicate one's class position and cultural capital.

The people who perhaps condescend or look down upon, of course, one way of looking at it is that it makes them feel superior if they look down upon Hindi films. It makes them feel a little more educated, I guess. It makes them feel a little more media literate, because they know that blood is not blood when it is shown in films. A song is not really sung by us, and they are also the same people who, I guess, have some other mode of entertainment available to them, because of being a little better off economically also—and having access to foreign films and entertainment via video, laser discs, and travels abroad. (Shah Rukh Khan, interview, 15 March 1996)

Khan also articulated that Hindi films did not possess much symbolic capital: "It does not make a good conversation piece to come back home and tell that I saw x-y-z Hindi film. It makes more of a conversation piece to like *Phantom of the Opera* than some Hindi movie." When I asked him why that was the case, he explained: "Because it's a common mode of entertainment. It's not a specialized mode of entertainment. It's not

skiing, high up in the Alps. It's not shooting some pool. It's not playing bridge with a beer in your hand. It's not going to a discotheque, in mini skirts. Whenever things are more inaccessible or more special, they become more important to people. This is common entertainment. For me to say that I saw x-y-z Hindi film—because even the *rikshaw-wallah* [rickshaw driver] has seen the film—it doesn't make it special at all" (Shah Rukh Khan, interview, 15 March 1996). After communicating this tremendous consciousness and awareness about the low cultural status of Hindi cinema and its audiences, Khan characterized his involvement in a somewhat populist vein, "I for one would say, very frankly, that I make films for that person who has no other mode of entertainment, and my job is just to entertain them, and I am very happy, and I'm very proud I can do that. I don't give a damn for people who don't think it's special." However, Khan admitted his initial ambivalence about working in Hindi cinema: "Five, six years ago, because of my education perhaps—being from St. Columba's School in Delhi—and then doing my graduation and master's and stuff, I may have also thought I wanted to make films always, but always thought that I'll make films which are different. There is no different thing. They are all the same films. Finally, it is just which one entertains you. And I have come to grips with that" (Shah Rukh Khan, interview, 15 March 1996). Despite the populist undertones of his assertions, by mentioning his elite high school, college education, and graduate degree, Khan locates himself within a social world that would normally not be associated with Hindi cinema.

His ambivalence about the form of popular cinema and the link he posited between the films and the socioeconomic status of their audiences came up later in our interview as well. We were discussing the global circulation of Hindi films, and Khan expressed his surprise at some of their unexpected peregrinations: "Even in Switzerland I saw some houses playing the films we've done, which is strange, because Switzerland is a very high per-capita kind of place, where I didn't think Hindi films would reach." He marveled that "foreigners" actually liked Hindi films: "We just need to make them a little less tacky, and I'm sure we can reach the international market" (Shah Rukh Khan, interview, 21 March 1996). Not only do Khan's statements reveal his underlying disdain for the mainstream cinema, they also illustrate the underlying developmentalist attitudes that accompany a discussion of Hindi cinema and its audiences. Given his characterizations of Hindi cinema as a medium produced explicitly for the Indian masses, it was surprising to Khan that Hindi films actually circulated in a "developed" country like Switzerland—as signified by its

high per-capita income — and that foreigners, by which he most probably meant white Europeans, would like them.¹⁶ As Hindi films have been circulating internationally since the 1950s, Khan's idea of "the international market" is obviously a very circumscribed one — representing the industrialized North.

All of the statements presented thus far illustrate how commercial filmmaking is predicated on a sharp dichotomy between filmmakers and audiences, through which filmmakers also constitute their identities as sophisticated social elites. The primary audiences for Hindi cinema in the 1980s and early 1990s are represented as a distinct class from filmmakers. Although filmmakers allude to the existence of more elite viewers, their presumed absence in the cinema hall renders them as if non-existent. The sentiment of disdain, which I argue is an integral part of the production culture of the Hindi film industry, is apparent in the discussion of front-benchers and declining standards of Hindi cinema. However, just about four years after the articles discussed above proclaimed that filmmakers had to "cater to front-benchers or face ruin," Khan was predicting that attitudes toward Hindi cinema were changing for the better. In the following section, I discuss the changes in films, filmmakers, and audiences that occurred in the industry and filmmaking from 1994 to 2002 that made it possible for films to be considered "cool" a decade later.

THE PREHISTORY OF COOL: 1994–2002

Box-Office Bonanza

In January 1996, when I arrived in Bombay to start my fieldwork, the dominant mood within the film industry was of optimism: that audiences were "coming back" to theaters because the quality of films and of movie theaters was improving immensely. The optimism was connected to the unanticipated and astounding box-office success of two films, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!* (HAHK; What Do I Mean to You!) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ; The Braveheart Will Take the Bride). When HAHK was released in 1994, the Hindi film industry was absolutely stunned by its phenomenal success, for it had been written off after preview screenings as one of the biggest flops waiting to happen. It was initially dismissed by the industry as a long, boring "wedding video," due to its 14 songs, 195-minute running time — lengthy even by Indian standards¹⁷ — elaborate depictions of North Indian Hindu wedding rituals, and the absence of a villain or violence¹⁸ (Figures 2–3). With its portrayal of excessively wealthy but harmonious families, traditionally dressed heroines,



FIGURE 2 Scene from *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!* Courtesy and copyright of Rajshri Productions.



FIGURE 3 Madhuri Dixit and Salman Khan in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!* Courtesy and copyright of Rajshri Productions.

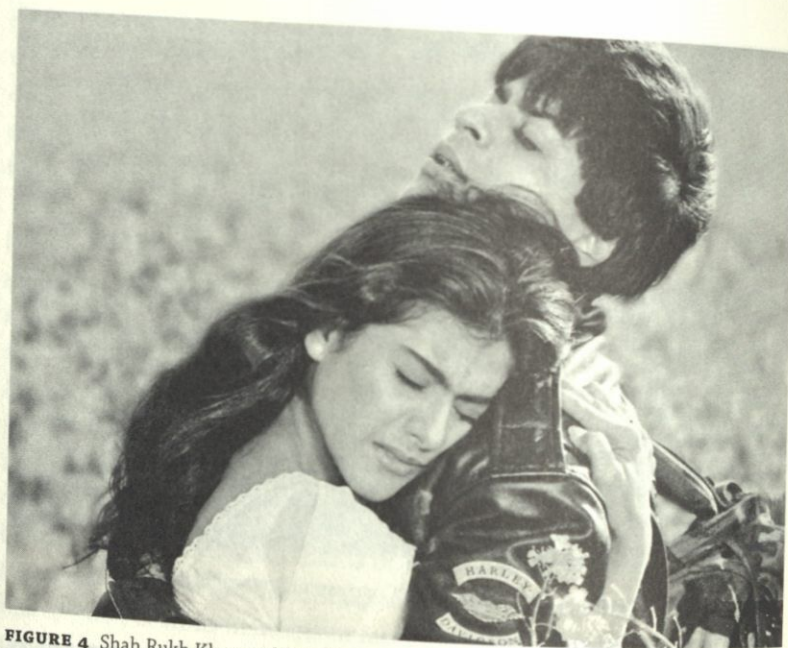


FIGURE 4 Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. Courtesy and copyright of Yash Raj Films, www.yashrajfilms.com.

and young lovers who were willing to sacrifice their love out of a sense of duty to their families, the film challenged the dominant norms of filmmaking at the time. Its relatively linear and episodic narrative structure, very minimal plot, and lack of a villain were also not typical of mainstream Hindi films at the time.

The industry was again taken by surprise the following year with the release of *DDLJ*, a love story involving two Indians born and raised in Britain, which appeared as if it would surpass *HAK*'s box-office success (Figure 4). While *DDLJ* had a more familiar theme of young lovers who have to battle against parental opposition to their union (an unyielding father), its most unusual element—widely commented upon by the press—was that the young couple chose not to elope. In earlier love stories, youthful rebellion was the norm, and young lovers ran away together in order to make a new life for themselves despite parental opposition. *DDLJ* presented a different male protagonist, one who appeared almost passive in contrast to earlier heroes. In *DDLJ*, even though the heroine's mother encourages the young couple to elope—this in itself an unusual portrayal—the hero refuses to do so and works very hard to win over the heroine's father, to gain his permission for their marriage, despite the fact that the heroine's marriage had already been arranged by

her father to his best friend's son. DDLJ has earned the title of the longest running Indian film of all time, having completed 800 weeks in Bombay's Maratha Mandir theater as of February 18, 2011. Both films, due to their tremendous success in India and in diasporic markets, had an enormous impact on filmmaking—in terms of themes, long titles, visual style, music, and marketing—for the next decade. They ushered in an era of what the industry termed “family entertainers”—love stories filled with songs, dances, and cultural spectacle like weddings, set against the backdrop of extremely wealthy, extended, and frequently transnational, families.

The extent of HAHK's and DDLJ's success was beyond the industry's expectations because of the altered media landscape that Hindi filmmakers were operating in by the mid-1990s, which included the presence of satellite television. Both films were also touted as initiating a resurgence in theater going, which was remarked upon by the English-language press in articles like “Goodbye to Formula?” (Chandra 1995) and “Back to the Movies: In the Age of TV, Audiences Flock Back to Movie Halls” (Chatterjee 1996). The tone of these articles was in stark contrast to the scenario presented a mere four years earlier. Whereas earlier articles had been overly pessimistic in their assessment of the state of filmmaking and the health of the Hindi film industry, this later batch was filled with statements about the magic of cinema and the new wave of innovation sweeping through the industry. For example, “Goodbye to Formula” asserted, “Business is booming, but clichés are passé . . . The box office is lapping up un-Bollywood films, leaving traditional wisdom stumped. Even the money men are now looking beyond the twin peaks of violence and vulgarity” (Chandra 1995: 120). These sentiments were a strong contrast to the industry's own previous articulations of gloom and, as well as scholarly accounts that, focusing on earlier periods of the Hindi film industry, continually predicted its decline due to the entrance of technologies such as video and cable television (see Chakravarty 1993; Pendakur 1989; Vasudevan 1990).

The commercial performance of HAHK and DDLJ demonstrated to the film industry that in the age of satellite, cable, video piracy, and increased competition for audiences, it was still possible to generate astronomical profits at the box-office. Taran Adarsh, the editor of *Trade Guide*, a weekly trade magazine, characterized to me the impact of HAHK on the industry:

One *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, and the economics of the Hindi film industry has gone haywire I would say, because in today's times when we

have cable, we have video, we have television, we have video piracy, we have a lot of factors which oppose the big-screen entertainment, yet to have a film doing a business of 200 crores¹⁹ [2 billion rupees] in the first year is a very difficult task. If someone would have told me that it's going to do 200 crores, I would have laughed it off, but it's a fact! So, when a film did 200 crores, people realized, "Oh, that means there is business. We have to make good products." (Adarsh, interview, September 1996)

Shyam Shroff, the head of the distribution company Shringar Films, and the father of Shravan Shroff, explained that the increased business potential that these two films signified was connected to their quality. "In a gap of one year, you have two major blockbusters like never ever have happened in the film industry. You have that kind of business waiting for you; the point is now you have to have a picture to collect that kind of audience, that kind of money. If you make a bad movie, you don't expect people to go and pay you" (Shyam Shroff, interview, April 1996). Shroff and Adarsh both expressed a tautology that I heard frequently during my fieldwork: audiences will only come to see a good film, and the way to know if a film is "good" is when audiences come to see it. Of course, their statements linking commercial success with cinematic quality is in direct contrast to the arguments presented in the previous section, especially in relation to the discussion about *Lamhe*—an acknowledged "good" film that performed poorly at the box-office. In the discussion about the 1980s, the dominant view presented by the press and filmmakers was that "bad," "trashy," or "vulgar" films were the ones that did well at the box-office and that good films like *Lamhe* did not have much commercial scope. The unanticipated success of *HAHK* and *DDLJ* therefore necessitated a major re-envisioning of the industry's axioms about filmmaking and audiences. Similar to filmmakers' discourses about the '80s, however, cinematic quality in the '90s was linked to the advent of new technologies and the social class of audiences.

The Era of Satellite and Returning Middle-Class Audiences

The attitudes toward new media technologies underwent a remarkable transformation between the two periods. Whereas video was posited as the reason for the degeneration of Hindi cinema in the 1980s, the presence of satellite television was cited as a factor for the improved production values of Hindi films in the 1990s. If video made filmmakers take shortcuts, satellite made them try harder. There were two strands to this

argument—enticement and education—each addressing the distinctly imagined class-based identities of the audience. One explanation, based on middle-class ideals of domestic comfort and privatized leisure, centered on trying to entice assumedly elite viewers away from their television sets. Filmmakers argued that since they faced increased competition from satellite television, they had to spend lavishly to project a cinematic experience unavailable at home. Rajjat Barjatya, the director of marketing for Rajshri Films, explained their decision to make *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!* with optical stereo sound as a way to deal with the challenges posed by satellite television: “That is the only way we can combat video and satellite TV, which is penetrating almost every home today . . . When you sit at home you have 50 channels, and at least 45 to 50 films are being screened every day if you include the TV and cable channels. Why [would] a person come to a cinema? The film has to be extraordinary; the cinema has to be extraordinary; the entire experience has to be extraordinary, only then will he come” (Barjatya, interview, April 1996).

The other explanation had to do with the reforming tastes of the implied mass audience. Filmmakers argued that with audiences being exposed to the “best” in the world, or to “international” standards, they demanded no less from Hindi films. DDLJ’s director, Aditya Chopra, explained that audiences were becoming better judges of quality and more discerning in their tastes, which he attributed to satellite television and its plethora of channels: “Mainly due to satellite, they see so much international stuff that when they come and see a Hindi film . . . I’ve seen [the] audience talk today about camerawork, about sound, about effect, which was unheard of! A common man saying, ‘*arre kya light kiya shot ko!*’ [Look how well he lit that shot!]. You know, they [didn’t used to] talk like that! But nowadays they do, so it’s a positive step” (Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996). According to Chopra, the consequence of audiences becoming more cinematically literate is that they patronize better quality films, enabling the box-office to be a truly accurate and transparent signifier of cinematic quality: “At least earlier, even bad films used to run. Now, thankfully, no bad film does well, which actually harms us more; if a bad film does well, it harms us more, even when a good film does not do well. When a bad film does well, you suddenly get shaken *ki* [that] ‘Oh God! It’s going to take a lot of time for them to actually understand that [on the one hand] this is not good, [and on the other] this is good’” (Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996). Chopra’s comments about “bad films” running at an earlier time are an allusion to the trashy ’80s and indicate the im-

pect of audience taste upon filmmakers; he represents audiences' poor choice in films as undermining his aesthetic sensibilities. The implication here, consistent with the audience-based narratives of cinematic quality presented in the previous section, is that more discerning audiences will lead to better filmmaking.

The other feature of the '90s media landscape was the regular presence of dubbed Hollywood films. Rather than expressing anxiety about competition from Hollywood films, filmmakers were quite confident in Hollywood's inability to appeal to the vast majority of Indian audiences. In fact, some filmmakers welcomed their presence as a sort of pedagogical tool for audiences, which would enable Hindi filmmakers to improve their own filmmaking. Screenwriter Honey Irani—who wrote *Lamhe*—predicted, "The audience which is watching will also improve. They'll accept new things from us. When they've seen, they've opened their eyes to see, 'arre, arre, yeh bhi ho raha hai, yeh ho raha hai' [Oh, this is also happening; this is happening], so when we do some experiment, they will accept it, instead of rejecting it. So definitely it will help them to grow and help us to grow" (Irani, interview, May 1996). Once again an intrinsic connection is asserted between audiences and filmmakers—whereby the evolution or maturation of audience taste has a positive impact upon filmmakers' own identities as creative individuals and artists.

If the altered media landscape of the '90s fostered cinematic quality by helping the "masses" or the "common man" to become more discerning viewers, the other feature of the discourse of improvement was the celebrated "return" of middle-class audiences to the cinemas. Producer/director Rakesh Roshan was blunt in connecting quality to the composition of the audience, asserting, "First we were stuck with front-benchers, but now directors have a choice" (in Chandra 1995: 122). Komal Nahta, the editor of the trade magazine *Film Information*, stated that wealthier people were patronizing Hindi films again, evident by the "hi-fi people of Bombay" arriving at the movie theaters in the posh areas of downtown Bombay via their latest imported cars. He also mentioned that college students, who were once dismissive and contemptuous of Hindi films, had started watching them because films like *HAHK*, *DDLJ*, and others appealed to their sensibilities. More than the content of films, however, Nahta emphasized the material conditions of film-viewing as the main impetus for elites to return to cinema halls.

For these last six or seven years, the ultra-rich people—from Malabar Hill in Bombay, Nepeansea Road—they had stopped going to the cine-

mas [for] two reasons: first, they saw all of the films on the videos; second, the cinemas were in a pathetic state. Now videos are not there²⁰ and cinemas . . . [have] the air conditioner [that] is always on. They've got the best sound system. They've got lovely seats. They've got different classes where the highest classes are so high-priced that they are assured that these *jhopad-patti wallahs* [slum-dwellers] will not come and sit next to them, and with the air conditioning on and all, they've realized *ki* [that] film-going is a pleasure. (Nahta, interview, September 1996)

Differential pricing of tickets, based on seat location, meant that class hierarchy and separation had always been maintained inside the cinema hall. Nahta's observation that the most expensive seats in the theater were priced so high that wealthier viewers were assured that slum-dwellers would not be sitting next to them, however, demonstrates that the narrative of improvement in the mid-'90s was less about the quality of cinema, than about the *quality of the viewing experience* for middle and upper classes, who were seeing all of the films on video anyway. With the steep increase in ticket rates, the "front-benchers"—who according to the press were "extending to the dress-gallery" (Jain 1991: 28–29) by the early '90s—had been priced out of these areas and put firmly back in their place in the cinema hall; therefore, the celebrated "return" of audiences to theaters in the mid-1990s was really about reinforcing social hierarchies and re-inscribing social distance into spatial distance within the public space of the cinema hall. The advent of multiplexes several years later, with their extremely high ticket rates, means that elite viewers do not even have to acknowledge the existence of poorer viewers, as they are simply priced out of the movie theater; thus, with respect to theatrical exhibition, a literal process of gentrification has been taking place.

Gentrified Films

If the return of middle-class audiences to the theaters was interpreted and explained as a sign of cinematic progress, what were the features of this new and improved cinema? Many scholars have discussed how films from this time period were very different from anything that had come before.²¹ Aesthetically, films in this period exhibited vastly improved production values that included digital sound, foreign locations, extravagant song sequences, and lavish sets. Much greater attention and emphasis began to be paid to the clothing, styling, and physique of stars, as well as the overall production design of films. Narratively and thematically, the

most noticeable differences had to do with the representations of class, youthful romance, and the Indian diaspora.²²

A very visible contrast between the successful films from the mid- to late 1990s and earlier Hindi films, focusing on families and romance, was the nearly complete erasure of class difference and the tremendous focus on wealth. All signs of poverty, economic hardship, and struggle were completely eliminated from these films, and the protagonists, rather than being working class or lower middle class as they were in earlier films, were incredibly rich—usually the sons and daughters of millionaires. Sachin Bhaumick, one of the most prolific and successful screenwriters, who began his career in the Hindi film industry in 1956, commented on what he found peculiar about *HAHK*: “India is such a poor country, but the picture, *mein koi economic crisis nahi hain* [there isn’t any economic crisis in the film]. Not a single character is poor. All of them are happy, and all of them are rich, and all of them have no monetary, economic problem” (Bhaumick, interview, October 1996). Not only was there an absence of poverty, the moral valence about wealth had also shifted within these films. Sharmishta Roy, the art director for some of the biggest hits of the late 1990s and early 2000s, who played a key role in defining a new visual style that became identified as the hip and cool new Bollywood, discussed how the representations of the wealthy had changed in Hindi cinema: “People we show as rich now . . . we don’t show them as flashing their money. You see when we used to have *zamindars* [wealthy rural landlords] in our films, they were very rich and they were flashy. Or they were autocratic and feudalist in their attitudes. It’s not so now. The rich are rich, but they are not bad. The whole concept has changed. Previously, rich was bad and poor was good, right? Rich is not bad anymore, and that’s not how they’re going to be portrayed either” (Roy, interview, October 2000). Roy’s statement about the moral values associated with wealth and poverty is a reference to earlier eras of Hindi cinema, where the main villains in films were frequently moneylenders, rural landlords, and wealthy businessmen, while peasants, workers, or others of modest economic means were the heroes. Whereas wealthy businessmen were frequently the symbols of exploitation, injustice, and even criminality in Hindi films from the 1950s through the 1980s, by the mid-1990s they were more commonly depicted as benign, loving, and indulgent fathers. The narrative focus and valorization of wealth was also explained in terms of the aesthetics of production design. During my interview with screenwriter Anjum Rajabali in 2000, he narrated an anecdote in response to my observation that all signs and references to poor people had disap-

peared from contemporary films. He told me that he had come up with an idea for a script with the mill closures in Bombay as the backdrop—he thought he could base the protagonist in one of the *bastis* (slums), trying to fight the mills being shut down. He convinced a director with his idea, and so he and the director went to a producer to pitch the story. The producer was absolutely aghast and exclaimed, “But we can’t make a film like this! We can’t have such poor people. They’re so poor—it won’t look nice!” Then the producer asked, “What will Ajay Devgan [the star that they had in mind for the role] wear?” When Rajabali responded, “I don’t know, jeans, a kurta, and *chappals* [sandals],” the producer was horrified and exclaimed, “Ajay Devgan can’t wear chappals! What if we set it in Canada? Then everyone can look nice.” Rajabali complained, “No one in the industry wants to show a slum anymore.” He told me that in his previous screenplay, *Ghulam*, when the producer asked him if it was set in a slum or a lower middle-class colony, he answered “lower middle-class colony,” for the sake of expedience since, “slum has become a really bad word.”

With Rajabali’s story in mind, I asked Roy her thoughts about why most contemporary Hindi films did not depict slums or working-class milieus as they had in the past. She surmised that the directors she worked with had grown up in a very privileged setting and were basically interested in replicating or improving upon that world. She explained that they would not have much interaction with, or desire to represent, people of lower class backgrounds because it would contradict the directors’ aesthetic sensibilities: “Okay, if there has to be an interaction between someone from the *basti* [slum] and someone from an upper-class society, there will still be a slight amount of crudeness to it, because people who come from a *basti* will not have the same sophistication as someone from the upper society. I don’t think they ever want to get into that, everything has to be very, very classy” (Roy, interview, October 2000). Roy’s statements illustrate how the discussion about quality and aesthetics in cinema is imbued with judgments about social class.

With the erasure of poor and working-class protagonists from filmic narratives, love stories from the mid-1990s were also quite different from earlier eras, which frequently had class difference as the source of parental disapproval, which therefore played the central conflict in films. With protagonists of the same class background, the source of dramatic tension and narrative conflict in films from the mid-’90s was internalized and centered on the conflict between individual desire and duty to one’s family. The plot manifestations of this conflict either involved a love triangle or strict parents who eventually yielded to their child’s choice of

partner. In both types of stories, the character was torn between someone he or she loved and someone he or she was obligated to marry. Roy explained, "That kind of feudalism is not there in our films any more. It's more about people from equal societies falling in love, and then there's probably a triangle now. I think that's what most of the themes are there today, it's not so much rich versus poor and opposition, it's more about a triangle, all from the same society" (Roy, interview, October 2000). With her choice of the term "feudal" to describe the plots and themes that focused on class conflict, Roy implicitly positions the '90s films, with their emphasis on elite social worlds, as a more modern and desirable state of affairs in filmmaking.

Although Hindi films have had a long history of depicting youthful rebellion, especially against strict fathers,²³ after *HAHK* and *DDLJ*, the theme of compliant lovers, willing to sacrifice their love for the sake of family honor and harmony, became the dominant norm. The hero and heroine's passivity—and obeisance to patriarchal norms of honor and notions of filial duty—illustrated the essentially conservative outlook of these Hindi films, regardless of their cosmopolitan and MTV-inspired visual style. These family entertainers presented a commodified Indian identity arising from a specific North Indian Hindu cultural milieu, based on stereotypes about the "joint family," the Indian English phrase to denote a multi-generational, patrilocal household. Thus, the success of such films was interpreted by the media and the state as a celebration of "family values" and an affirmation of "Indian tradition" in an increasingly globalized world. Discussing the part of the plot in *HAHK* where the female protagonist decides to sacrifice her love out of her sense of duty to the family, Bhaumick declared, "Madhuri, anytime could have spoken out, 'I'm not going to marry my brother-in-law, because I'm in love with Salman Khan,' but there is a tradition: the girl should not talk before the elders, and they kept it up, and this clicked now in the '90s. Very fantastic thing. That shows in our heart; we have maintained our values" (Bhaumick, interview, October 1996).

The emphasis on family values and Indian tradition extended to the cinematic depiction of diasporic Indians as well, which was a significant transformation ushered in by this period of Hindi filmmaking. Since the mid-1990s, Hindi films have frequently represented Indians living abroad as more traditional and culturally authentic than their counterparts in India. While earlier Hindi films used characters of Indians living abroad for comic relief or as villains, many Hindi films after *DDLJ* have diasporic Indians as their protagonists and are set almost entirely in countries

like Australia, Canada, England, or the United States. Thus an authentic "Indian" identity—represented by religious ritual, elaborate weddings, large extended families, respect for parental authority, adherence to norms of female modesty, injunctions against premarital sex, and intense pride and love for India—is mobile and not tied to geography. One can be as "Indian" in New York, London, or Sydney as in Bombay, Calcutta, or Delhi.

Through their valorization of patriarchy, the Hindu joint family, filial duty, feminine sexual modesty, and upper class privilege, the family films of the mid- to late 1990s were much more conservative than films from earlier eras; however, their visual, narrative, and performative style made them appear modern and "cool." Shah Rukh Khan, the male lead of *DDLJ*, characterized it as a very "modern" film, asserting that all of the analyses about its success being based on a celebration of traditional values had missed the point: "I think people have pinpointed the wrong reason for its success. They talk about its values, they talk about going back to the old values like respecting parents." Rather than being rooted in tradition, Khan argued that his character was actually very savvy, a welcome change from the standard depictions of young romantic heroes in Hindi films:

I think it's a very yuppie character actually. I think it is completely illogical, stupid, and childish, the way our hero behaves otherwise in films—where he runs away with the girl. I was asking a writer, he said, "Okay you run away," and I asked, "*Where do you run away?*" Finally where do you run away? You can't run away from the earth, so it's a futile thing. You lose out on a job; you lose out on money; you lose out on credibility; your parents don't like you; you're fighting against the world; you meet rapists on the way; you're traveling on trucks; it's like, "Why lose out on all that?" Get your way done, in a little more, management-like way, like the yuppie of *Dilwale Dulhaniya* did . . . he got his way done; he got married to the girl, and it didn't pass him any hardships. (Shah Rukh Khan, interview, 20 March 1996)

Khan's criticism of plots featuring youthful rebellion as illogical and futile—and his characterization of *DDLJ*'s lack of defiance and unwillingness to challenge patriarchal authority as modern—is a response to the routinized representation of young romance in Hindi cinema; essentially, what is socially radical—romantic love across social divides—in the context of a highly stratified society, where the majority of marriages are arranged and endogamous, appears cinematically clichéd. Within the context of the history of this particular genre in Hindi cinema, *DDLJ*'s

intrinsic social conservatism appears radically different. Khan's representation of his character's complicity with, rather than resistance to, dominant social norms as comprising a more rational approach to life—akin to a yuppie manager—reframes traditional notions of filial duty as a modern practice.

Khan continued with his observations about how DDLJ reflected a modern outlook and represented the values of a younger generation, which he described as less interested in codes of propriety and honorable conduct than with favorable outcomes:

There's more of a younger generation feel today, which is more competitive, more intelligently competitive. It's . . . no longer for your honor or my honor. I don't give a damn for your honor or my honor, as long as the thing is done. So the films are becoming modern, but because old ideas and values are so deeply imbibed, people like to hold on to them. So, on the face of it they would like to still believe what they've always believed, but somewhere, subconsciously, a film like *Dilwale* works for me mainly because it's a modern film, and maybe that is why it is becoming more fashionable to like Hindi films. (Shah Rukh Khan, interview, 20 March 1996)

The increasing modernization of Hindi cinema was not only leading to its improved status within elite social spheres, but also among the second generation within the film industry, according to Khan. Predating Shra- van Shroff's statements, cited at the beginning of the chapter, by a de- cade, Khan asserted that, since Hindi films were "not as silly as they used to be, say twenty years ago," he believed that the children of filmmakers, who "I'm sure didn't think much of the films," were also changing their attitudes and becoming less embarrassed about working in the industry. From Khan's perspective, this younger generation of filmmakers was fur- ther responsible for "modernizing" Hindi cinema, described in terms of a "reduction in melodrama and larger-than-life performances," thereby enabling Hindi films to begin to be regarded as fashionable or cool. A dif- ferent perspective about such changes was offered by producer/director Govind Nihalani: "There is no anger anymore" (Nihalani, interview, May 2006), alluding to the absence of plots and narratives focusing on issues of social justice and equity, which have had a long history of representa- tion in mainstream Hindi cinema.

Generation Bollywood

By 2000, the dominance of films focusing on the love lives and dilemmas of wealthy protagonists, often located in the diaspora, was commented upon by the English-language press. *Outlook* magazine's article, "Riverdale Sonata," with the subheading, "*Desi* is out. As target audiences change, Hindi cinema gets itself a designer Archie-comics look," pointed out, "there are no subaltern angry young men any longer; new Bollywood speaks the language of an affluent, growing middle-class" (Joseph 2000b). Similar to earlier discussions about the economic centrality of front-benchers in the 1980s, the rationale offered for the changes in cinema was attributed to audiences, specifically the emergence of diasporic audiences as a very lucrative market for Hindi filmmakers. The article argued that the "vastly attractive, but demanding overseas market has forced Hindi films to become hip and sophisticated" (Joseph 2000b).

While audiences, specifically imagined target audiences, are central to a discussion of commercial filmmaking, I contend that some of the most apparent changes in Hindi cinema in the mid-'90s—in terms of mise-en-scène, themes, and protagonists—which have been too readily attributed to overseas markets, also have to do with filmmakers' own personal tastes, privileged social backgrounds, generational identity, and desire to counter the condescension expressed toward commercial Hindi filmmaking. In fact, these filmmakers initially made films that appealed to their own sensibilities, which happened to work in certain markets, rather than doing any sort of a priori quasi-market research about diasporic or elite audiences in urban India. For example, producer/director Karan Johar, a second-generation member of the film industry, whose films have been extremely successful in overseas markets, exemplifying the gentrified narratives and aesthetic discussed earlier, was asked in an interview for the English-language weekly *Tehelka* about his "obsession with perfect colors, perfect figures, and saturated opulence." Johar replied, "I think it comes from my need for beauty and good looks, which all through my childhood I didn't have" (Chaudhury 2007). Describing his films as portraying a very aspirational lifestyle, Johar also explained his cinematic choices in terms of his personal history and social background: "People ask me why there's no poverty in my films—but I've lived a very, very sheltered life. The only trauma I had to deal with was being fat, so my films were about the things I knew about. My first film had to be about heartbreak and first love" (Chaudhury 2007).

Johar's first film, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (कुकुकुहोहा; *Something Happens*, 1998), was a love triangle peopled with wealthy, stylish protagonists, decked out in designer brands (Figure 5). The film's narrative, which unfolds in flashback, spans a decade where the protagonists are substantively introduced during their final year in college. Sharmishta Roy, who has been the art director for all of Johar's films, discussed the criticisms leveled against the production design for the film, specifically the college portions:

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai to a lot of people it looked like a comic strip. It was meant to be an Archie comic. It was meant to be Riverdale High . . . We achieved what we were setting out to do, because that was my briefing. I was told, "It's Riverdale High." It's not any ordinary college. It's not a college that you see in Bombay, because that's no fun . . . you can see that on television every single day. What we're trying to do is give the people a feeling that they've come to college, which is really great; it's great fun, and this is where they meet and life was so beautiful. (Roy, interview, October 2000)

She attributed the aesthetics and styling of contemporary films as a generational phenomenon, "Our films today are being made by younger directors who are very, very Western in their outlook. Their exposure to Western society is more than to our villages in India." Speaking about another portion of *KKHH*, which is set in a children's summer camp, Roy admitted that such a concept was alien in India, but praised directors like Johar for introducing such novelty into their films.

We don't know of summer camps over here . . . when I was talking about the upbringing of the directors today, they're not absolutely Indian. I mean, they know of summer camps and they've probably been to them also, so that's what they're bringing into our Indian society, and our Indian society is lapping it up because it's such great fun. We have heard over and over again we are a poor country, and no one wants to see that thrown in your face all the time. You go into a theater and you want to escape all that, and that's what these guys are doing; they're just packaging things so well that it's entertaining; it's touching; and it's visually pleasant. (Roy, interview, October 2000)

The notion of entertainment as a form of escape is a common feature of the discourse surrounding mainstream cinema. Whereas the more conventional understanding of Hindi cinema is as a form of fantasy, and thereby a brief respite or escape for low-income viewers from their daily



FIGURE 5 Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. Courtesy and copyright of Dharma Productions.

struggles, Roy's comments here present a different sense of escape, that from the perspective of socially elite viewers who are tired of being reminded that they are from a "poor" country. By presenting a picturesque, glamorous, manicured world erased of all signs of poverty, Hindi films like *KKHH* offer a chance to escape the signs of other peoples' harsh lives. Such gentrified films allow wealthier audiences, including filmmakers, to briefly escape the "postcolonial condition"—the reminder of being national subjects in a poor or "developing" country like India (Gupta 1998). Unlike dominant explanations offered by journalists and scholars, which centered solely on audiences, Johar's and Roy's statements also remind us of the relevance of the social world and personal background of filmmakers for the form and content of Hindi filmmaking.

While Roy foregrounded the presumed "Western-ness" of certain filmmakers' social and cultural backgrounds, other prominent filmmakers associated with this period articulate the importance of kinship and cultural traditions in shaping their cinematic practice. Sooraj Barjatya, the director of *HAHK*, stated on the Rajshri Productions website, "I make films with the family at its centre, and for the family, because I've been brought up in an environment where the family mattered more than anything else. So it is but natural that my films reflect this point of view. My upbringing, though not totally conservative, has been very traditional, and it is this traditionalism you see reflected in the film."²⁴ In the rest

of his remarks, Barjatya mentions how he “subconsciously imbibed” the images of family weddings, which led to their incorporation in *HAHK*.

The highly affective portrayals of “Indian-ness,” found in films like *HAHK* and *DDLJ*, coincided with the influx of American programming on satellite television in India. Such films represented a response to the altered media landscape within India by a generation of filmmakers who were in their early twenties when satellite broadcasts began in the country. Aditya Chopra, the director of *DDLJ*, which was heralded as starting the trend of films focusing on the diaspora, spoke at great length with me about satellite television and how it clarified his sense of cultural identity and crystallized his goals as a filmmaker:

There is some stuff shown on satellite which you might not agree with ethically or morally or whatever, and you want to show to them that listen it's cool—it's good you watch all this—but don't forget we're Indians and we can still entertain, and we can still have fun with our own culture. You don't have to take your clothes off and dance! And dance to a music which actually doesn't make sense. You can listen to a folk kind of a song and have the same fun. So that's what I think cable and TV helps you, it sets up your goals more clearly. This is what we're up against and this is also what we should be able to do. (Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996)

Chopra's remarks present a strong sense of national identity, and anxiety over the impact of satellite television on ideas about entertainment and sentiments of cultural belonging. His proprietary attitude about culture and sense of purpose as a filmmaker was to counter satellite television's potential role as an agent of cultural imperialism. Speaking about the younger generation, Chopra posited his mission: “The basic attitude of the youth is that whatever you see that is foreign is cool, so you need to actually shake them up and say, ‘It's cool to be Indian!’” (Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996). In Chopra's statements, the meaning of “cool” extends beyond its connotations of approval and desirability to include cultural sovereignty and national pride. The connection between coolness and cultural pride was referenced a decade later by Shraavan Shroff, who asserted that Hollywood would not be able to wipe out filmmaking in India, like it had in other parts of the world because “Indians just love their own films and I think it's really cool” (Shraavan Shroff, interview, May 2006).

Chopra's cultural pride came across strongly when recounting his inspiration for making *DDLJ*. He stated that he had initially wanted to

make an international film that would showcase to the world—by which he really meant Western audiences—through a love story, the essence of Indian culture, in terms of emotions, sociality, and kinship behavior:

I feel that the West can learn a lot from just the fact as to how we, our culture—the way we think, the way we react, the way we love, is . . . so wonderful, which is somewhere or the other missing in the West. They are a little held back in their emotions; we are not; we give; we really react! I feel it's so wonderful that we can be so passionate about life. I feel we can share that with them, because they have this image which is "Oh there's this poor country, which is struggling all the time, which is the world of snake-charmers," or something like that, and you need to change that. "Okay, forget all that and see we've come a long way. Besides that, even with our progress, we've not forgotten our roots."
(Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996)

The essentialist dichotomy Chopra poses, between India and an undefined "West," has a long history, dating back to the colonial era. India's affective and emotional superiority is akin to the material/spiritual dichotomy constructed by nationalist leaders in the nineteenth century, as is the idea of a cultural bedrock that cannot be dislodged with material change (Chatterjee 1993). Like Roy, Chopra also exhibited a concern about dominant representations of India as a "poor country," and was eager to alter global perceptions.

His decision to base his characters in England was in order to highlight their cultural identity. Talking about the main father character, Chopra explained, "I wanted to exaggerate being Indian, so to put a man in India and be Indian is nothing; you throw a man out for twenty years and he's still stuck to it, that shows you: it brings the Indian-ness [out] more. So that gave me a very big advantage for my characters and my plot, so that's why I placed them, so that's why he became an NRI [non-resident Indian]" (Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996). As he continued to develop the idea for the film, Chopra realized that it would also be very relevant within India, because with the onset of satellite, he felt, "We were going a little away from the roots." According to Chopra, while he did not have a "higher" motive, other than making a good film that would be commercially successful, he stated he was "trying to make a film that would somewhere make you pause and think, and somewhere make you react, and make you feel nice about what you are—about being Indian. That was at the back of my mind, but not the main motive" (Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996). Chopra's insistence that his main motive was

to make a widely appealing film, but that he still had something larger he wanted to communicate, is an example of the negotiation involved in making what gets designated as "commercial cinema," that is, films aimed at wide audiences. Throughout his interview, he articulated a tension between making the film he would like to make versus what he believed others would like to see.

Whether discussing Indian youth seduced by foreign media, Westerners who need to be educated about India, or audiences who could feel nice about being Indian, Chopra's remarks are replete with references to imaginary interlocutors who motivate his filmmaking practice. Another instance where an imaginary interlocutor occupies a significant presence is in filmmakers' discussions of the condescension expressed toward mainstream Hindi films. Like Shraavan Shroff, many of the filmmakers most associated with "Bollywood" are second- and third-generation members of the film industry, who related the impact of criticism by their social peers outside the film industry. Chopra, whose father, Yash, began his directorial career in the late 1950s, recollected that when he was a child, he could "stand up" for Hindi films against the condescension of his peers, but he admitted, "I mean obviously you do get affected — say your dad makes a film and someone says something — that happens quite often — 'Oh that film was bad.' So, it hurts you; you feel bad, because we have a tendency to believe that our identification is our film, so it's like actually saying something against my dad" (Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996). He asserted that a motivating factor behind his filmmaking was to counter the criticism leveled against mainstream Hindi cinema: "You know, my target is not to get a pat on my back by my parents or friends who are close to me, who are going to like, in any case, whatever I do. No, that's not the point. The point is, okay, there is this guy who keeps talking shit about films: I need to convince him. I need to give him something so good that he will also — [so] he just can't help but like it" (Aditya Chopra, interview, April 1996). It is this desire for acceptance and approval that is a significant driving logic behind the gentrification of Hindi cinema and the transformation of the industry into Bollywood.

Thus far I have been discussing a younger generation of filmmakers who began their careers in the late 1980s (Barjatya), or mid- to late 1990s (Roy, Chopra, Johar), and whose fathers or grandfathers were also filmmakers. The changes in filmmaking initiated by these makers had an impact on films produced by older filmmakers as well. One notable example is Subhash Ghai, the producer/director who began his career in the late 1970s and was quite commercially successful in the 1980s — the

very period that was derided as trashy and vulgar by the press and other filmmakers. His films from 1997 onward have been markedly gentrified in terms of protagonists, production design, conflicts, and narratives. Since 1999, his films have enjoyed greater commercial success outside of, rather than within, India. Speaking in Bombay in 2000, Ghai related how filmmakers needed to think about the "global Indian" and their problems, which he felt made for "more effective cinema" than films focused on issues of class exploitation. He referred to films revolving around personal relationships and generational conflict as "international," and described *Yaadein* (Memories) the film that he was currently working on: "I am making a movie of a British Indian who has been living there for the last twenty-five, thirty years, and his three daughters have been brought up there. He . . . is very orthodox, very conservative. The daughters are not, so the conflict of values—what happens and how he handles his three daughters, and how the three daughters handle him—is the theme of *Yaadein*" (Ghai, interview, October 2000). Ghai felt that the issue of generational conflict transcended the limitations of culture and nation, reasoning that the film would appeal to people living in Britain and in India, unlike films focusing on farmers or *zamindars* (rural landlords)—issues he felt were specific to India.

Expressing his relief that he was not limited to making films about "U.P., Bihar, or Punjab," Ghai asserted that films about personal relationships enabled him to grow as a filmmaker. He implicated changes in audiences as allowing him to finally break free from restrictive mindsets and realize his full potential as a filmmaker:

I am completing my twenty-five years as a director now. In 1991 I started feeling that I am jogging in the same place, because as a director, and as a visionary, and as a person I have grown, but I had to make those films only—rural films—all the time. I was now allowed to try other parameters, which is happy news for a progressive filmmaker like me—that you can go ahead, think something new, innovate something; then people are going to accept that. That's why I could go for *Taal*, otherwise I would have made a very sentimental, highly melodramatic film, which I used to make—like *Ram Lakhan* or *Karma*—in the '80s. So, the evolvment and development you see in my cinema, it is thankfully [due] to the growth of the audience also. (Ghai, interview, October 2000)

Ghai's presentation of self is mediated through the choice of narrative focus and the figure of the audience. Ghai portrays certain topics as more

reflective of his cosmopolitan outlook—which is what I think he means by “progressive”—and credits audiences for enabling him to realize his potential as a filmmaker. Like Ramesh Sippy, Ghai represents his evolution as a filmmaker as an intersubjective experience where (imagined) audiences play a significant role in fashioning his filmmaking practice.

This section has delved into some detail about how the social world of filmmakers, changes in the media landscape, and trends in Hindi filmmaking from the mid-'90s resulted in a gentrified cinema, in terms of both the content and style of films. This gentrified—or in the words of the filmmakers above, more “modern,” less “feudal,” not as “silly,” more “international”—cinema is the starting point for Hindi films to be regarded as “cool.” However, what truly enables Hindi films to arrive socially, and what allows filmmakers to make the films they really want, hinted at by Ghai above, is the arrival of the multiplex.²⁵

THE ARRIVAL OF COOL: THE MULTIPLEX

“What I think is the best thing that has happened to the Indian film industry in the last five years are multiplexes,” declared Meghna Ghai-Puri, Subhash Ghai’s daughter and the president of Whistling Woods International—a film school started by her father in 2006. We were sitting in her office at Whistling Woods, located in Film City, a sprawling state-owned film and television production facility in Goregaon East, a northern suburb of Bombay. It was May 2006, and we were discussing the changes that had taken place in filmmaking since the turn of the millennium. Continuing with her praise of the multiplex, which centered on the smaller seating capacities of the theaters, Ghai-Puri asserted that multiplexes were “encouraging a young breed of filmmakers to make interesting, intellectual films, which were capturing a certain audience,” who were “more sophisticated” than before (Ghai-Puri, interview, May 2006). Akin to the advent of video and satellite television in earlier periods, the arrival and expansion of multiplex theaters have generated considerable discourse by the Hindi film industry, as well as the print and broadcast media, about audiences, aesthetic standards, and cinematic idioms. Much of this discourse is marked by a strong rhetoric of change, progress, and modernization, whether it is addressing the materiality and phenomenology of cinema-going or the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of film production. Similar to the discussions about video and satellite, the one about multiplexes also serves as a commentary about class, taste, consumption, and filmmaker subjectivity.

While multiplexes have transformed the material conditions and experience of seeing a movie in a theater in India and produced new audience imaginaries within the Hindi film industry, the feature most commented upon by journalists and filmmakers has to do with the engendering of a new type of cinema. Around 2003, the English-language press in India started to discuss the emergence and economic viability of what was initially termed “niche cinema,” which soon got labeled “multiplex cinema,” and attributed a causal relationship between the sites of film exhibition and cinematic practice. Initially used to describe films made with smaller budgets and lesser-known actors, about themes that were characterized as “off-beat” and “different” from a purported Bollywood norm, understood to appeal only to English-educated, affluent, urban audiences, the definitions and descriptions of “multiplex cinema” have been as much about audiences and viewing practices as they have been about aesthetic properties and narrative content.

In the early days of the multiplex in India, they were lauded for their implicit pedagogical function—frequently characterized in a developmentalist vein—of improving the cinematic tastes of the Indian viewer. By offering a range of non-mainstream cinematic choices, multiplexes were cited as the catalyst for reforming the average Indian taste in film, which had been stunted for so long by the formulaic fare produced by the Bombay film industry. For example, in the article, “The Multiplex Effect,” which appeared in the *Indian Express*, the director of the first multiplex in the northern Indian city of Kanpur, Shailesh Gupta, discussed how, when his theater first opened, “Hindi had a virtual monopoly on the minds of the audience,” and that there was little interest in any other cinema, even big-budget Hollywood films. Eight months later, however, due to his programming decisions to screen a variety of films, patronage of an English-language film like *Bend It Like Beckham* brought in decent business. Gupta was willing to experiment with his programming, even if it did not garner huge returns, for he assigned himself the responsibility of inculcating more sophisticated tastes for his patrons: “I am keen to help in the maturing process of the Kanpur film-goer” (“The Multiplex Effect” 2003).

Similar to the discussion about video, front-benchers, and the trashy '80s, the idea of multiplex cinema is premised on the correlation between content, audience, and conditions of viewing. Multiplexes, with their smaller seating capacities and much higher ticket prices—which translates into more elite audiences—were hailed by a number of filmmakers, associated with the parallel cinema movement of the 1970s and '80s, as making cinematic risk-taking commercially viable. In the above-

mentioned article, veteran filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan, whose films are in Malayalam and are consistently categorized as “art” or non-commercial, asserted, “Audiences and exhibitors are now looking for a different kind of cinema. The advent of multiplexes has also encouraged this change in mindset. If you have a film that might not necessarily run house-full in a 1,000-seat hall, you now have the option of showing it in, say, a 200-seat auditorium, where it might very well draw a full house” (“The Multiplex Effect” 2003). The November 2007 issue of the English-language film magazine *Filmfare* featured an interview with the veteran actress Shabana Azmi: “What the multiplex has done today is release the producer from having to cater to the lowest common denominator. The multiplex has demonstrated that Indian audiences are not [a] monolith, and it is possible to make niche films that can become successful” (Ghelani 2007: 130). In November 2009, at a panel discussion titled “Re-Framing Indian Cinema,” held at New York University in conjunction with the Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council Annual Film Festival, director Shyam Benegal spoke of the impact of multiplexes as thoroughly groundbreaking for Indian cinema. He reflected on how, until the advent of multiplexes, every film that was released needed to be able to fill at least 80 percent of the capacity of single-screen theaters in order for the distributors to break even: “For years and years this was an enormous problem. We always used to say, ‘Why are we having these huge cinemas? Why does it have to be like this? Why is it that only big pictures can be made, big block-busters?’ . . . So you couldn’t possibly make films of a smaller kind; it had become almost impossible. It’s really when the multiplexes started that everything started to change. You didn’t have to look at the audience as one big grey mass” (MIACC 2009b). Contrary to the above statements, I discuss in chapter eight how mainstream Hindi filmmakers conceive of their audiences as comprised of diverse constituencies, whose varying tastes need to be addressed or transcended, not a monolithic “grey mass.”

A couple of years earlier, for a special feature about multiplexes in *The Indian Express*, Benegal narrated a familiar history of cinematic decline connected to the advent of technology and class composition of audiences in the cinema hall. Rather than satellite television, however, multiplexes were the technological catalyst for improved cinema. Discussing the 1980s, Benegal wrote, “TV took away the urban middle-class audiences and cinema came to be patronised by the working classes alone—or those who could not afford a TV set at home and those who didn’t have access to TV. At this time, film had to rely on an entertainment

concept that would gather the largest possible audience—a common denominator sufficiently lowered and spread thin. A kind of dumbing-down was taking place” (Benegal 2007). While mainstream Hindi filmmakers castigated video and working-class audiences for the poor quality of filmmaking generally, Benegal focused his comments on the impact of television and working-class audiences on non-mainstream forms of filmmaking. Describing the emergence of an “alternative cinema movement” in the 1970s, which targeted “the professional middle-classes and educated audiences,” he declared that with the spread of television and the retreat of middle-class audiences from theaters, alternative cinema was “wiped out.” With the advent of multiplexes, the possibility for an alternative cinematic practice was revived once more: “The opportunity created in the ’70s and then lost in the ’80s came back with the multiplex in the late-’90s” (Benegal 2007). For Benegal and his peers, the structures of production, distribution, and exhibition, which depended on pleasing large numbers of people, were viewed as inimical to quality cinema. Quantity—either in terms of seats in a cinema or the number of viewers—is seen as incapable of producing quality. The equation of poor quality and poor taste with large numbers has a long history that is not unique to the Indian context (Williams 1983: 192–97). As with many Hindi filmmakers, cinematic quality is also integrally connected to the presence of middle-class audiences in theaters.

The very attribute that Gopalakrishnan, Benegal, and Azmi lauded about multiplexes—that they provided a space for films of ostensibly limited appeal—was also a criticism leveled against them initially. For example, an article about the impact of multiplex films on mainstream Hindi films appearing in the November 2007 issue of the English-language film magazine *Filmfare*, asserted, “Till two years ago, ‘multiplex films’ was a euphemism for films that were looked upon as too niche, experimental, and commercially nonviable. If and when such films got made, their business was restricted to a few screenings at the still nascent multiplexes in select cities” (Amin 2007: 69). The overall tone of the article was overwhelmingly positive, however, claiming that 2007 was a “watershed year for the non-mainstream Indian film industry.” It characterized the impact of multiplex cinema as “a wind of change taking the Indian film industry by storm,” where “the boundaries between mainstream and offbeat are blurring” (Amin 2007: 69). The reasons offered had to do with the unanticipated commercial success of certain smaller budget, less conventional films, which communicated to filmmakers that audiences were open to new subject matter. The willingness of top stars to

work on projects by directors regarded as “niche” was also cited as a sign of changing times.

During fieldwork in Bombay in 2005 and 2006, I encountered many comments about the paradigmatic effect of multiplexes on Hindi filmmaking. The main thrust of those comments had to do with how certain films would have never been made, or if made never released, prior to the advent of multiplexes. Elaborating upon her point about the revolutionary impact of multiplexes, Meghna Ghai-Puri stated, “A good thing that it’s done is that a film like *Iqbal* can actually see a 75- to 80-print release in India, which couldn’t have happened earlier. A film like *The Little Terrorist*, which is a documentary film, actually got a release in the theaters. Again, something that would have never happened earlier” (Ghai-Puri, interview, May 2006). Ghai-Puri’s comment about *Iqbal* was echoed by many others; *Iqbal* and *Page 3*, both released in 2005, were the two most talked about examples of unconventional films that had reasonably successful runs in multiplexes during that time. The films were very different from each other in terms of theme, plot, protagonists, and visual style: while *Iqbal* was a sweet, touching tale about a deaf and mute Muslim teenager’s dream to play on the national cricket team, *Page 3* was an acerbic and cynical journey into the immoral and decadent world of celebrities in Bombay, as observed by a journalist who writes for the society/gossip pages of a newspaper.

What both films had in common were the absence of major stars, major directors, diegetic song sequences, or expectations for success. While both films were touted by their makers and the press as “hits,” setting into motion pronouncements about audiences, changing tastes, and changing cinema, the determination of commercial success is nonetheless relative, an issue I examine further in chapters five, eight, and nine. *Iqbal* and *Page 3* did reasonably well in Bombay, but not in other parts of India; the trade press, which assesses commercial outcome from the point of view of the distributor, classified both films as “coverage to commission-earners,” indicating that distributors recovered their investment, but did not necessarily earn a profit. The point to be noted here is the simple fact of not losing money was interpreted as a sign of success. Talking about the impact of multiplexes on filmmaking, producer/director Vikram Bhatt cited *Page 3* and *Iqbal*: “These kinds of films would have been washed out before” (Vikram Bhatt, interview, January 2006). Bhatt’s declaration was related to the star cast of both films and based on the dominant industry credo that major male stars are necessary to draw crowds to theaters, hence necessary for commercial success. Like HAHK

and DDLJ a decade earlier, *Iqbal* and *Page 3* defied the film industry's expectations and contravened its production fictions; while the former films proved that unparalleled commercial success was possible in a competitive media landscape, the latter demonstrated that audiences existed for films that strayed from mainstream conventions. If HAHK and DDLJ, by virtue of their stupendous business, were "good" films from the perspective of the industry, *Iqbal* and *Page 3* were "good enough" films in terms of their business. In both decades, the return of middle-class and more elite audiences to the cinema hall was cited as the determining factor for these films' successful commercial outcome.

The commercial viability of limited or narrow appeal was represented by filmmakers as truly enabling, revealing the way multiplexes articulated with filmmakers' subjectivities in a manner similar to discussions about video and satellite in earlier periods. Vikram Bhatt reflected upon the effect of multiplexes upon his filmmaking: "Even my film, *Ankahi*, maybe, I would not have made it three years back, four years back, because I don't know if, if it's going to really involve the masses though it's a very simple tale. It's a tale of adultery, so that appeals to all kinds of classes and masses, but even then I feel somewhere the audience would be—it would be a more multiplex film" (Vikram Bhatt, interview, January 2006). At a panel discussion about multiplexes held in Bombay in September 2009, reported in the *Indian Express*, documentary-turned-feature filmmaker Kabir Khan asserted, "Thanks to multiplexes, we're now making films we couldn't possibly have made earlier" (Pillai 2009).²⁶ An important reason, according to director Sujoy Ghosh, was because "A multiplex audience is usually more accepting of different kinds of films and is more aware of trends in global cinema" (Pillai 2009). For all of the filmmakers quoted here, the multiplex serves as a metonym for a certain type of film, as well as a certain type of audience, which poses far fewer creative constraints on filmmakers than audiences who frequent the traditional single-screen theaters.

The audiences frequenting multiplexes are the arbiters of taste, critical to a determination of Hindi films as cool. When asked if it was the people making films or the people watching them that accorded Hindi films their improved status, Vikram Bhatt replied, "It's because the people who are watching the films that is allowing them to be cool" (Vikram Bhatt, interview, January 2006). Ghai-Puri elaborated that the "youth" demographic—in the Indian context most commonly used to refer to teenagers, college students, and people in their early twenties—was most responsible for Hindi cinema's improved status. She explained that the

lavish material experience that multiplexes offer has made cinema-going among youth very attractive, hence, cool: "I think that multiplex culture has really brought in that coolness to Hindi movies. I think the coolness factor really comes from the teenagers, school-going, college kids—they always went to the cinema, but I think its becoming cooler now to go to the cinema because of the whole experience they're getting when they go" (Ghai-Puri, interview, May 2006).

Bhatt elaborated that with the multiplexes and their particular audience profiles, the form and idioms of mainstream cinema were undergoing a transformation. Like Shah Rukh Khan, Bhatt described Indian cinema as a *nautanki* art form replete with melodrama and passion, "You know there was melodrama and there was screaming and 'Gabbar Singh! *Main aa raha hoon!*' [Gabbar Singh, I'm coming!] That kind of idiom was there, which is now finished; the audience laughs at that. So the audience wants more subtle, near-natural performances" (Vikram Bhatt, interview, January 2006). Bhatt asserted that if filmmakers wanted to target younger audiences, then films had to appear "cool" since such audiences "don't want to see 'uncool' things; they don't want to see over-the-top drama; they don't want to see the heroines cry; they want more subtle—the whole audience starts to get very edgy and shift the minute that they know a very emotional scene is going to happen now. Somebody's dead and the heroine is going to cry—they don't want to see it. They're like 'Okay, just skip this; we understand her pain; let's get on with it.' So I think that's the way it's changing" (Vikram Bhatt, interview, January 2006). While a decade earlier Shah Rukh Khan credited a younger generation of filmmakers with reforming Hindi cinema from its melodramatic excesses, Bhatt here credits a younger generation of viewers for the same feat. Common to both perspectives is the function of affect and emotion in characterizing Hindi cinema as something either cringe-worthy or praise-worthy and the role of youth in bringing about cinematic change.

"Multiplex cinema" is, however, an ambiguous category in terms of form and content, since during my research I encountered notions of the multiplex film that were at variance with the characterizations presented above. The day I went to visit Tarun Kumar during his film shoot at Kamalistan Studios in January 2005, he was quite anxious, since his latest film, *Awaaz* (Sound), was about to release, and he was nervous about its box-office prospects since it did not boast a hugely popular cast of stars, though it was produced at a high budget.²⁷ During lunch in his trailer, Kumar brought up the topic of his upcoming release and was particularly annoyed by the fact that another action film was opening on the same

Friday as his; then he reasoned, "Well, you know there are two different audiences actually for these films, *Awaaz* is really a multiplex film, while the other one is more a single-screen film." Perplexed by his characterization, since *Awaaz* did not appear outside the conventions of mainstream Hindi cinema—it was a fast-paced thriller, about a man's quest to capture a dreaded criminal, replete with songs and action sequences shot extensively in European locations—I said, "But I thought multiplex films were films like *Jhankaar Beats* and *Mumbai Matinee*"—films that focused on the various emotional and relationship dilemmas of upper middle-class Bombayites. Kumar responded patiently, "No, those are crossover films.²⁸ Multiplex films are those [that] are more elite. Single-screen films are more massy." Kumar's statements revealed the symbolic capital carried by multiplexes within the film industry, mainly due to their association with elite audiences. By asserting that his film was a multiplex film, Kumar was signaling a host of associations that would accord his film status and prestige—the main being that urbane, educated, sophisticated audiences would want to see his film, which implied that his film was urbane, sophisticated, and cool.

FROM UNCOOL TO COOL

An interest in filmmaker subjectivity led me to focus on the notion of coolness that has been so prominent during my fieldwork. This chapter has demonstrated how the discourse about coolness within the Hindi film industry is a discussion about cinematic quality, filmmaker subjectivity, and the social status of audiences. By examining Hindi filmmakers' discourses of quality and change, this chapter explored how commercial filmmaking is a complex intersubjective endeavor, where audiences comprise the imagined interlocutors with whom filmmakers are in constant dialogue. It illustrated how a driving logic behind the oft-remarked transformation of Hindi filmmaking in the mid- to late 1990s was filmmakers' desire for legitimation by social elites or individuals who were not regarded as the traditional audiences of Hindi cinema. Filmmakers' narratives of change also reveal the significance of technologies of distribution, such as video, satellite television, and the multiplex theater, in mediating their subjectivities as cultural producers.

A prominent feature of the discussion about cinematic quality is the sentiment of disdain expressed toward certain films and certain audiences. Although, as "commercial" cultural producers, Hindi filmmakers are frequently identified with their audiences in media and scholarly dis-

courses, what this chapter has shown is how filmmakers strive to distance themselves from the bulk of the viewing audience. For many years, a central tension for Hindi filmmakers was the disjuncture between their actual audience and their desired audience, a tension that appears to have been resolved with the arrival of the multiplex theater. Poor, working-class, or other socially marginal audiences have been consistently scapegoated by filmmakers, both mainstream and alternative, as the root cause for bad cinema and substandard filmmaking. By contrast, middle-class and more socially elite audiences are represented as the catalyst for quality, since they enable, according to filmmakers, the pursuit of high standards and the realization of creative potential. Therefore, just as the urban middle class is represented as instrumental for a globalizing, "shining," "new" India in state discourses (Fernandes 2006), middle-class audiences are represented as responsible for a modern, fashionable, new cinema in industry discourses. The correspondence between middle-class identity and high quality is not merely relegated to a discussion of film form and content, but also to the social world of the Hindi film industry. The next chapter examines the significance of the middle-class as a normative social category in the film industry's concern with respectability.

Casting Respectability

For a few days in March 2005, the Bombay film industry was embroiled in what became known as the “casting couch” scandal. India TV, a private television network and a recent entrant on the burgeoning Indian televisual landscape, aired footage one Sunday morning of a Hindi film actor, Shakti Kapoor, soliciting sex from a reporter, who was posing as an aspiring actress, in exchange for helping her to get her first break.¹ The goal of this undercover “sting” operation—as it was referred to by India TV—was to expose the “casting couch” syndrome within the Bombay film industry and perform a crucial social service: according to the head of the network, “Parents of girls coming in from small towns to Mumbai can now tell their girls to be more careful” (Pherwani 2005).

What was interesting about this whole episode was the contrast between the media’s discussion of it and the film industry’s reaction to it. The press overwhelmingly described the manner in which the whole operation was conducted as entrapment, and the Indian media was dominated by criticism of India TV’s methods and goals, as well as discussions about journalistic ethics, right to privacy, and the boundaries between public and private.² While much of the public response was a type of cynical amusement, the film community’s response bordered on the hysterical. The uproar within the film industry was not caused by Kapoor’s attempts to exchange roles for sex, but that in his efforts to persuade the reporter/actress to have sex with him, Kapoor named