

Bollywood Cinema
TEMPLES OF DESIRE
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Chapter Five

THE ACTOR AS PARALLEL TEXT: AMITABH BACHCHAN

To speak about an Indian “actor text” presupposes some cultural understanding of the concepts of “acting” and performance especially in the domain of drama. The dramatic tradition in India is vast and heterogeneous, the commentaries on it equally large and complex. An important North Indian dramatic presentation with a wide currency in North India at least is *Rāmlīlā*, a folk theater based on the *Rāmāyana*. In her study of an important *Rāmlīlā* in performance—the *Rāmlīlā* at Ramnagar—Anuradha Kapur (1988) sets up three key modes of representation with which one can begin to theorize the idea of actor as parallel text. The first may be called the redundant gesture where an actor would repeat “insistently, illogically, passionately, a single gesture” (7). The aim here is to draw attention (diegetically) and spectatorially to an important emblem through which he/she has been marked. It could be the long hair of Sita, a widow’s insistence on applying *sindūr* or vermilion to the hair-parting (although for the rest of the world her husband is dead) or simply a wisp of gray hair. The second is the way in which “spectators collaborate with the actors” in creating intersubjective meanings since the “*līlā* [play] in performance says something to us about ourselves” (5). Finally, character in a *līlā* is only a *pātra* (vessel). In this definition a character is like a vessel that contains “qualities of a character” being portrayed; the actor, in the words of Geeta Kapur, conveys “the attributes and emotion of a ‘character’ to the viewer while himself remaining intact” (1987: 89). Although cinema is not a *līlā*, the spectator comes to cinema with a critical vocabulary that grew out of a pre-cinematic experience. The father of Indian cinema, Phalke, was certainly conscious of that tradition of audience

participation in a performance. From the second half of the nineteenth century especially, Parsi theater fused folk dramas like the *Rāmlilā* with Western dramatic forms and created a relatively fixed form that was more centrally controlled by the colonial space of the proscenium arch theaters (Anuradha Kapur 1993). We have already seen the ways in which many aspects of Bombay Cinema—frontality, thematic and semiotic eclecticism, the fusion of the realistic with the fabulist, the persistence of the song and music texts, acting as display, and so on—have had a significant impact on the thematics and materiality of this cinema. In isolating the role of the actor as parallel text, one needs to keep these varied indices of theatrical production in mind.

That said, there is no unproblematic antecedent of the Bombay cinematic hero as such. What Bombay Cinema inherits is the form or discourse of various folk theaters, plus their dramaturgical and epic antecedents. As complex signs embodying historical, cultural, and economic meanings, Bombay stars are cultural “compromises” of a bewildering complexity. At the same time as locating and emphasizing the culturally specific antecedents of the Bombay star, it would be foolish to ignore a second crucial problematic—the role of Hollywood stars in this genealogy. For the fact is that Hollywood films dominated Indian middle-class viewing habits until at least the late 1940s. Many of the early Hollywood “stars” had considerable following among Indian audiences: Eddi Polo, Charlie Chaplin, and above all Douglas Fairbanks Sr., whose *The Thief of Baghdad* was immensely popular and spawned many imitations, including *Hind Kesari* (1935), *Husn Ka Chor* (1953), *Baghdad Ka Chor* (1934/46/55). Bombay stars modeled themselves, in part, on them, as readily seen in Raj Kapoor’s imitation of Charlie Chaplin, Ranjan and Mahipal’s imitation of Douglas Fairbanks and Errol Flynn, and later, Shammi Kapoor’s imitation of Elvis Presley (the singer and the star). In Bombay Cinema, stars began to come into their own the moment they were used by independent producers to undermine a burgeoning studio system, which, by the mid-1950s had either closed down or taken over by merchantile investors for hire to independent producers. From around the early 1950s onward, they were wooed away from the studios, where they had been salaried employees, through the offer of vast payments to appear in films made by independent producers. Thereafter, the “star” became the single most important aspect in the production, circulation, and exhibition of films. Popular cinema in India, perhaps even more so than in Hollywood, became the cinema of the star rather than the cinema of the director or the studio. Writing almost exclusively about the construction of the Hollywood star, Dyer (1979) and Ellis (1982) advanced a model for an

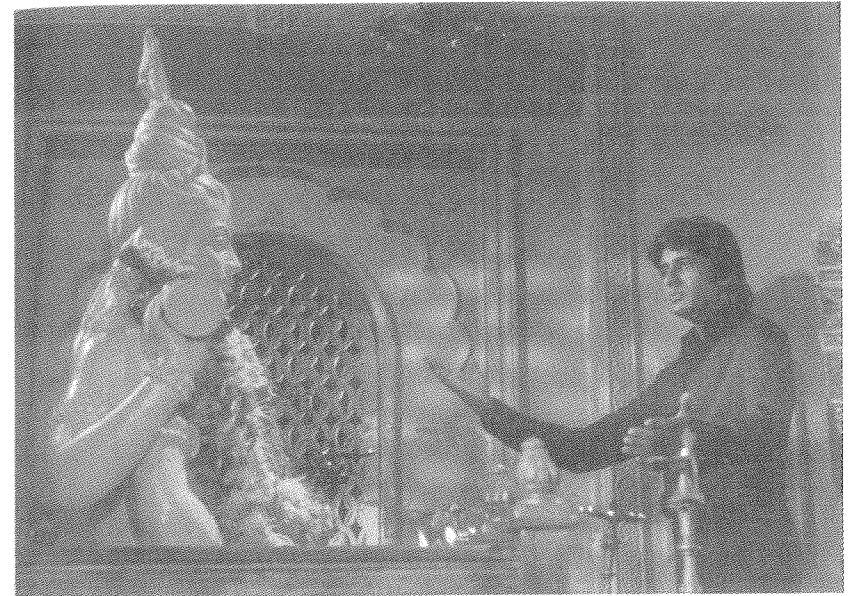
analysis of stars that has considerable heuristic value. Their key points may be summarized as follows:

- (i) the star’s roles should be examined in regard to a culture’s precursor text(s);
- (ii) through these manifold roles or narrative placements on screen a star gradually accumulates his or her own symbolic “biography”;
- (iii) the screen biography and the star’s actual life intersect, often generating industry deals and occasional political placements;
- (iv) the star is a material phenomenon, a physical body with idiosyncratic or stereotypical voice, physiognomy, gestural repertoire, physical agility, and costume;
- (v) the star is iconic whose public reception is manifested in shrines, calendar art, comics, T-shirts, and so on.

To account for the Indian star, this model needs to be expanded. In particular, I will argue that song and dialogic situations constitute two overarching systems that lead to the memorial construction of the star in Bombay Cinema.

To illustrate how stars are constituted in cinemas other than Hollywood I want to examine in some detail the star persona of Amitabh Bachchan. In the ninety-year history of Bombay Cinema no actor has achieved the status of Amitabh Bachchan, and none certainly has found a place in Madame Tussaud’s London waxwork museum. He was also, arguably, the last of the pan-Indian film heroes. As sociologist Shiv Vishvanathan has observed (*Sunday Times, Times of India*, September 24, 2000: 1), the current crop of Bollywood heroes have varying constituencies even among Hindi/Urdu speakers: Bobby Deol and Ajay Devgan are popular in Northern India, Sanjay Dutt in Maharashtra and Shah Rukh Khan in the diaspora. From 1973 (the moment of *Zanjeer*) to 1990, Amitabh Bachchan was the dominant figure in Bombay Cinema. He continues to have a major influence through his massive investment in film production and cable TV, through his work as the host of India’s most popular quiz show *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (Who wants to be a millionaire?) as well as through his continued, albeit intermittent, appearances in films such as *Hum* (The collective, 1991), *Major Saab* (The major, 1998), *Mohabbatein* (Varieties of love, 2000), and many others. He has starred in literally dozens of films, not all of them successful; he has dominated the fanzines that are such important props of the Indian popular cinema and has consistently been an item of interest in news maga-

zines; and at key moments he has acquired social and political prominence. There are a number of reasons (which I will elaborate in greater detail below) for his phenomenal success. First, Bachchan is the first post-partition major star who came from the Hindi-speaking heartland of Uttar Pradesh and who was thoroughly conversant with standard Hindi as well its dialects, notably Avadhi. Second, his film persona challenged the figure of the noble, transcendent Rama as the dharmik model of the hero. His roles deployed features that belonged to the antihero Karna in the *Mahābhārata* while the generic frames of his films destabilized the dominant cinematic form much as the baroque *Trauerspiel* destabilized German tragedy (Mazumdar 2000: 239–40). Finally he projected this antiheroism onto the very modern notion of the angry young man in rebellion (an Indianized John Osborne character) and grafted this onto the figure of a subaltern hero “as an agent of national reconciliation” (Prasad 1998: 141). The rebelliousness thus synthesized reflected the disenchantment, the oppression, the hopelessness of the slum dweller who saw in Bachchan’s acts of “antiheroism” a symbol of his or her own aspirations. The rags-to-riches theme that always paralleled the narrative of personal revenge in Bachchan’s films was the imaginary fulfillment of the slum dweller’s own fantasies. To get the social context right we need to recall that the slum dweller provides cities like Bombay and Calcutta with its everyday labor force, a labor force that would include professional tailors as well as stevedores and extras in films. It is the class that is gradually supplanting the middle class as the primary spectators of cinema. It is also the class that has been the prime victim of an economic liberalism that has heightened the differences between rich and poor. As Fareeduddin Kazmi has pointed out, “It is the articulation of this marginalized sector that largely explains the phenomenon of Amitabh Bachchan” (Kazmi 1998: 140). What is not mentioned by Kazmi is Bachchan’s own (contrary) reformulation of the source of this anger in markedly bourgeois (and genetic) terms. *Movie* (September 1983: 41) quotes Bachchan: “There seems to be a strong sense of revolt within me. Probably it is in my genes. I have seen rebellion in my father’s writing, in his early life. . . . When I tried to show anger on screen, it seemed to come through beautifully.” It is ironic that someone with impeccable middle-class roots (poet father, socialite mother, connections with the Nehru/Gandhi dynasty) begins to espouse the dreams of Bombay shanty dwellers and speaks for them. Since the latter constituency does not have access to fanzines (which circulate only in middle-class literate India) the star persona (as received by the slum dweller) has to be constructed through an essentially oral transmission of the star as a cinematic presence. This is where we need



Amitabh Bachchan in Yash Chopra’s *Deewar*, 1975. Rebellious dialogue with God. Publicity Still Kamat Foto Flash.

to take up the construction of the star with reference to the song text and the “dialogic situations.” Thus even as we examine our fanzine archives in some detail we need to keep in mind the ways in which “emotion” or “sentiment” actually circulates with reference to a star. Speaking about the failure of Amitabh Bachchan’s *Shaan* (1980) the producer Ramesh Sippy stressed that what Indian audiences want most of all are sentiments, “even in the midst of action” (*Movie*, October 1982: 83). We need to keep a critique of emotional judgment firmly in mind as we proceed.

AMITABH BACHCHAN AND FANZINE CULTURE

The fanzine archive I shall use for a reading of the construction of the star in Bombay Cinema ranges from *Filmfare* (latterly a glossy fare with a website and ads that include Cindy Crawford’s *Revlon* products and *Durex* condoms), *g*, *Stardust* (the “most foul of the bitch fanzines”), *Movie*, *Cine-Blitz* to *Showtime*, *Screen*, and Hindi magazines such as *Ji-Stār* and *Māyāpurī*. A number of these fanzines are registered in overseas cities such as London (*Stardust*) and Colombo, Sri Lanka (*Screen*). The Indian diaspora, of course, has its own fanzines—many rather ephemeral—such as *Indian Movie News* in Malaysia, *Mehfil*, *Aaj*, *Bollywood West*, and *Bollywood Times* in Canada.

Despite the growing internationalism of the movie fanzine market, we need to keep in mind the limited readership in India of fanzines written in English. As the advertisements show so clearly, the target readers of the English-language fanzines are largely middle-class urban dwellers with disposable incomes for whom fanzines are also catalogues of consumer items and fashion. Although there is some overlap, Hindi fanzines have a different, though not necessarily larger, target audience, and need to be considered in any examination of fanzine culture because the ways in which lower-class workers, itinerant city dwellers, migrant labor force, peasants, indeed the general subaltern class, respond to cinema are captured more accurately in the Hindi fanzines. Compared to English fanzines, Hindi fanzines have fewer salacious details, they present the material in a more subdued, suggestive manner, and they don't carry glossy advertisements of expensive luxury items. One need only look at the very subdued *salwar-kameez*-clad August 1993 center-fold of Karishma Kapoor in *Ji-Stār* and the interviews given by Rishi Kapoor in *Māyāpurī* (August 19, 1993) and Aamir Khan in *Ji-Stār* (August 31, 1993) to see a second-order representation and discourse through which Bombay film is disseminated. The contrast between Hindi and English fanzines (a contrast we need to keep in mind always) illustrates the differing levels of reception of Bombay Cinema captured in Hindi and English fanzines. Although it is unwise to construct from the Hindi fanzine a complete subaltern aesthetics of cinema, it is nevertheless an important reminder that there is more than one narrative of reception available to a student of this form.

Clearly Hindi and English fanzines commodify stars rather differently, and it could be argued, and persuasively too, that the use of English fanzines may even lead to a very different reading of the star phenomenon. This qualification should be kept in mind as I return to both Indian and diasporic fanzines for a narrative of Amitabh Bachchan as parallel text. To begin with, English fanzines are a classic vehicle for the crossover of industry publicity and policy and the filmic text, which is the ultimate posit of the star. Industry publicity, control, and policy represent the social institution that produces and determines, in major part, the social consumption and circulation of film as commodity. In the case of Bachchan, industry publicity provides fanzines with a continuous barrage of information: his relations to other stars (male and female), his relations to "starlets" (the ultimate commodity), his achievements in stunts that are used to confirm his masculinity, his ambitions and desires, and speculation about his personal life. When *Time* magazine (April 8, 1991) carried a short piece on the Bombay film called *Hum* (1991), which marked the return of the 48-year-old Amitabh Bachchan and demonstrated



Amitabh Bachchan in Mukul S. Anand's *Hum*, 1991. "Jumma give us a kiss," Bachchan's triumphant return. Publicity Still Kamat Photo Flash.

his staying power, it observed, "During the '70s Bachchan [was] . . . No. 1 through No. 10. There was no one in between." To stay number one through ten, Bachchan consciously cultivated a screen biography of the aggressive underdog, and a personal, real-life biography of a disquieting, dark, brooding spirit drawn toward beautiful women as some kind of an aesthetic act.

In constructing a Bachchan "star biography" through the fanzine literature I want to begin by examining a small booklet that appeared with the January 1991 issue of the very upscale (30 rupees or £3 for Indians overseas) fanzine called *g* (a play on "G-string," "gentleman," and the Hindi honorific "ji" meaning "sir"), a glossy magazine in the old *Life* magazine format. The booklet, entitled *Junior g*, carries an account of Amitabh Bachchan's life as told to *g*'s editor Bhawna Somaya. In this account, Amitabh Bachchan frames his recollections in the genre of narrative fiction, recalling, initially, memories of the old gramophone in the house or a particular *dhun* on the sitar. Memories merge into discussions of his father, a Cambridge-educated Hindi poet and English literature academic, his mother, a strong-willed Sikh-Punjabi woman from Lahore, and his younger brother, more intelligent than he but less rebellious. Bachchan attended the University of Delhi and ended up reading for a degree for which he was ill suited—in science. He regrets this, recalling his immense interest in

Shakespeare and Shaw. He moved to Calcutta and did a few years of clerical work, but all the while, he had a burning desire to join the film industry. A pause in the narrative occurs here. Jaya Bachchan (Bhaduri), his wife, speaks now, and her narrative is about how she, also a well-established actor, in fact a Satyajit Ray find, was courted by Bachchan when he was an aspiring actor. (In *Movie*, April 1985: 32, Amitabh Bachchan says that in marrying Jaya he "deprived the Indian screen of a fantastic actress" . . . "I feel Jaya was my best co-star," he added.) Marriage is followed by the meteoric rise of a star who is linked romantically with a number of leading cinema ladies—Zeenat Aman, Rekha, and Parveen Babi—though Jaya herself does not specify any names. She simply adds as an afterthought, "women have always been a problem with Amit. It was so, even when he was not a star." But passions are constructed in a Byronic manner: there is in Bachchan that dark, brooding melancholy, an inwardness at odds with his film persona. And there is poetry too, as is clear from a chapter in the booklet entitled "The Poet's Son." The father, Harivanshrai Bachchan, was the author of a well-known series of poems distantly modeled on Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, called *Madhusālā*, which had gone into its twenty-fourth edition by 1979. Composed in 1935, its subsequent English translation by Marjorie Boulton (*The House of Wine*) carried a foreword by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. The offhand transcription of his father's poem in the *devanāgarī* script in *Junior g* underlines the homage that the popular makes to high art.

The "stargraph" offered by *g* magazine came after Amitabh Bachchan had reached his peak. Despite the success of *Hum* later that year, by 1991 Bachchan's own star appeal was on the wane. So what we must do now is look back at the preceding twenty years and trace that career forward to the present. I will do this by reconstructing a Bachchan narrative once again through a selective citation from the surfeit of material available on him in the fanzines.

Let me begin with an early account of the actor given in *Star and Style* (May 1, 1970: 33):

A science graduate of Delhi University and son of the famous Hindi poet Bachchan, Amitabh possesses a sensitive face and his peculiar manner of parting his hair gives him a gentle look, a point which might have gone in his favour when K. A. Abbas interviewed him and at once selected him to play a role in his "Saat Hindustani."

Amitabh portrays a meaty role in the film—that of a meek poet among the seven Indian revolutionaries who cross into Goa to fight against the Portuguese. . . . The

young actor is very grateful to Mr Abbas who has given him such a well-etched role to play in his first experience with grease-paint. Amitabh is also playing key roles in Sunil Dutt's "Reshma aur Shera" [where he plays the role of a mute brother] and Mehmood Productions' "Bombay to Goa" based on a Tamil hit.

Neither *Saat Hindustani* (Seven Indians, 1969) nor the other films mentioned in the passage above were in any way significant. His performances in these films were no great shakes, and Bachchan was happy to accept, even as these films were in production, a lesser role opposite the reigning superstar Rajesh Khanna in *Anand* (1970). Yet *Anand*, a thoroughly professional work by director Hrishikesh Mukherji, brings out many of the later characteristics of Amitabh Bachchan. There is the same anger, the same unease with the definition of the heroic role. These get expressed by a slightly different gaze at the camera and one that counterpoints significantly the free-flowing movement of Rajesh Khanna. One also sees in Amitabh Bachchan's portrayal of the doctor hints of the rebelliousness for which he was to become famous. "When I signed on *Anand*," says Amitabh, "I was more excited about working with THE Rajesh Khanna." He adds, "Then came *Zanjeer*" (*Movie*, April 1985: 26–32, 26).

Then, indeed, came *Zanjeer* (The chain, 1973). The phrase is reprised, with variation, in the fanzines many times. So we read in *Movie* (September 1984: 41):

[Before *Zanjeer* Amitabh was] written off as a disaster. Then the "impossible" happened: *Zanjeer*. Made by a nearly bankrupt Prakash Mehra, the film went on to become a sensational hit (sold for 12 lakhs, it raked in 60 lakhs per territory) and launched the new, angry, young, violent Amitabh Bachchan.

Zanjeer is so important for the construction of the Amitabh Bachchan parallel text that we must pause to examine it in somewhat greater detail. The main role was offered to established actors first—Dev Anand, Dharmendra, Raaj Kumar, even Dilip Kumar—and came to Amitabh Bachchan on the rebound. The theme of this film is revenge placed in the context of cure for a personal trauma and public responsibility since the hero is now a police inspector. In challenging a notorious criminal, the police inspector brings about the end of a thoroughly unscrupulous and despicable bootlegging mogul but he also cures the cause of a recurring nightmare about a dark rider on a white horse. Revenge here is clearly a cure for a repressed memory going back to the Diwali night when his parents were shot by Teja, the crime boss. But revenge is also shown as a pleasurable but transgressive moment, which

is why the dharmik order closes in upon itself soon after the lid on repressed pleasure has been lifted. The film also marks the return, in a radically different form, of an earlier Bombay genre of revenge. The role of the villain Teja is played by Ajit (Hamid Ali Khan, a Muslim, who changed his name in the early 1950s), the swashbuckling hero of earlier films on the theme of revenge, notably *Samrat* (1954) and *Baradari* (1955), as well as the lapsed believer in *Nastik* (The atheist, 1956). In these films vengeance is not linked to a social cause and is purely generic. In *Zanjeer* vengeance carries a quasi-revolutionary fervor (public revenge) that is also directly linked to a private trauma. This is why the dream text in *Zanjeer* is significant. It is true that the dream sequence fills no more than a few frames of the film, but it is a highly concentrated dream text. The use of the horse taps into the importance of the *asvamedha* (horse sacrifice) and the *asvins* (the twin horse-headed gods) generally in Indian consciousness. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1980) has written sensitively on the subject, and I can do no more than gesture toward her conclusions. It is clear that the *asva* (horse) enters Indic consciousness at a crucial phase, displacing the bull and effectively effacing the mare. After this phase the stallion and the cow reign supreme in Indian mythology. In *Zanjeer* the horse and the rider frame the villain as father substitute and castration threat in the general symbology of the phallic horse in Indian culture. The first representation of the *asva* nightmare in the film is presented as a twice repeated shot of the horseman crossing the frame left to right. This is a slightly unusual form of Bombay representation because the Bombay film normally codifies such sequences through repeat zooms as in the flash visions of Rishi Kapoor in *Karz* (1980) or as a single shot as in *Babul* (Childhood home, 1950). For us the significance of the shot lies in the manner in which it metonymically connects with the miniature horse that was on the villain's bracelet the night he slaughtered the hero's parents. As a child, the hero sees this from the closet where he is hiding. What *Zanjeer* does is connect the power of horse symbolism (always threatening, always ambiguous) with the figure of Amitabh Bachchan. The conjunction of actor and the symbolic horse creates Amitabh Bachchan as a "complex text" sanctioned by mythology and able to respond to the need for rebelliousness in the restless Indian lower-middle and slum-dwelling classes (the target population of the Indian film industry as a whole) and a resurgent patriotism after the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. Although the immediate response to the film by the fanzines was not particularly positive—*Star and Style* (June 8, 1973: 35), for instance, declared that it was a poor imitation of *Dirty Harry*, already plagiarized in the same year by F. C. Mehra in *Khoon Khoon* (Murder! murder! 1973), and



Publicity poster for Prakash Mehra's *Zanjeer*, 1975. Bachchan's career-making film. Courtesy National Film Archive of India.

Filmfare (June 1, 1973: 35) gave it a score of 1 out of 4—the film is the foundational Amitabh Bachchan text and one that will have a special place in any survey of Bombay Cinema.

After *Zanjeer*, *Deewar* (The wall, 1975), *Sholay* (Flames, 1975) (for which he was paid only 1 lakh rupees, though the taxation department has never believed him on this), and *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) followed in quick succession, and his preeminence was sealed. By the end of the decade he had no equal. "After 1980," writes *Movie* (September 1984), "Amitabh went from strength to strength, soon getting to be regarded as a 'one man industry.'" More enthusiastically we are told "he was undoubtedly the greatest star in the history of the Indian film industry." From 1980 to 1984, *Movie* informs us, he starred in nearly every major hit: *Dostana* (Bonding, 1980), *Naseeb* (Good fortune, 1981), *Laawaris* (The orphan, 1981), *Namak Halaal* (The ungrateful, 1982), *Khuddar* (Shreds, 1982), *Andhaa Kaanoon* (Blind justice, 1983), *Coolie* (1983), and *Sharaabi* (The drunkard, 1984). Even his minor films grossed more at the box office than the films of almost all the other film stars. In fact, of the fifty-seven releases up to 1984, only five of Amitabh's films were in the red: *Zameer* (1975), *Faraar* (1975), *Alaap* (1977), *The Great Gambler* (1979), and *Do Aur Do Paanch* (1980). As we have already indicated, *Zanjeer*, his thirteenth film, was a superhit. Between that

time and the success of *Hum* (1991), however, seven others had reached the great distinction of what Indian fanzines call a “super-super hit”: *Deewar* (director Yash Chopra), *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Manmohan Desai), *Muqaddar Ka Sikander* (1978; Prakash Mehra), *Naseeb* (Manmohan Desai), *Laawaris* (Prakash Mehra), and *Coolie* (Manmohan Desai). Fanzines invariably make comparisons between Amitabh Bachchan’s success and Rajesh Khanna’s meteoric rise between 1969 and 1972 (from *Aradhana* to *Apna Desh*) when he too rewrote the annals of Bombay Cinema by single-handedly wiping out other major film stars and rewriting the record book of popular film hits. But soon afterward Khanna fell, probably a victim of his own cockiness and—such is the morality of Bombay Cinema and the fickleness of the filmgoers—his overhasty marriage to Dimple Kapadia, a sensational actor of 16 who was largely responsible for Raj Kapoor’s hit *Bobby* (1973). The fanzines dwell fondly on Bachchan’s punctuality, his professionalism (*Cine Blitz* [April 1982] and *Movie* [April 1985]), his dedication, his willingness, his careful improvisations on the script, and his extraordinary sense of commitment to artistry in an industry that really functions on the basis of shift work. There are also carefully constructed commentaries on the voice behind the corporeal body. In *Laawaris* we hear his voice first, and then we see his face. In *Chupke Chupke* (Silently, silently, 1975) he speaks to Dharmendra for a full three minutes before he is shown, and in *Hum* the powerful narrative voice-over is Amitabh Bachchan’s. (Satyajit Ray used his voice in *The Chess Players*, too.) There is also a dialogue in *Hum* on the differences between biological and social bacteria—all done more or less in monologue—in which “Tiger”/Bachchan speaks to Jumma’s brother Gonzales for a good five minutes. The allegorical nature of this narrative—biological bacteria can be killed by insecticide, moral bacteria infects society and destroys it—means that standard metaphors of the slum are deployed to make abstract statements about the ethical order. The fanzines point out on many occasions that without Bachchan’s voice all these scenes would have collapsed. But there is also a carefully publicized selective biography in which a comfortable middle-class life is reclassified as the picaro who comes to Bombay with only his driving license, not unlike the Raj Kapoor character in *Shree 420* and *Jagte Raho*, who also came to the city-without-compassion and is rejected by it.

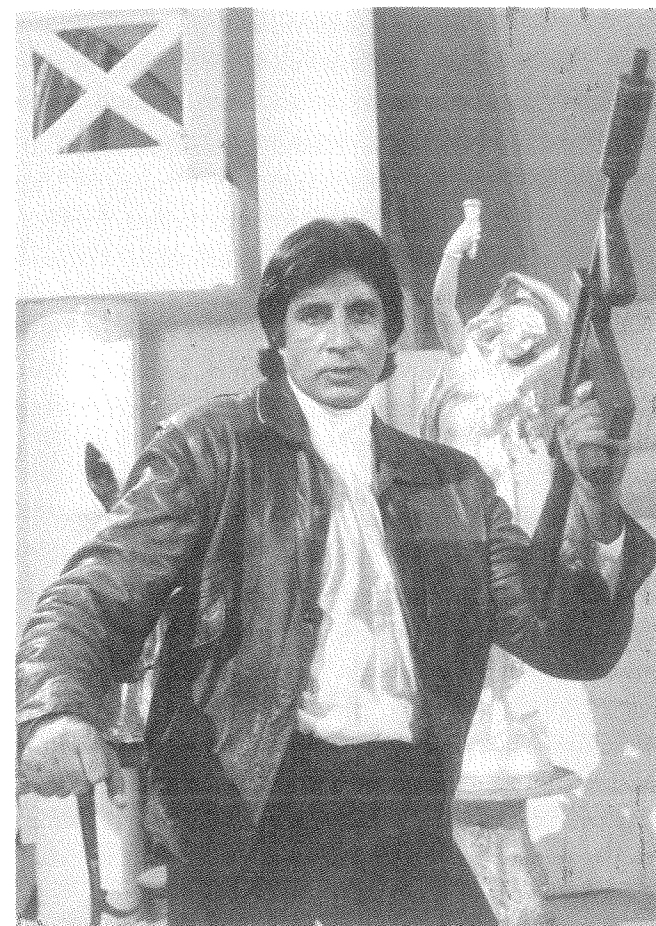
Just as *g* celebrated its second anniversary with a special feature on Amitabh Bachchan, so did *Movie* (September 1983) when it opened an office in London to cater to the large British South Asian diaspora. In basing its first “international” cover story on Amitabh Bachchan—“One Is a Lonely

Number,” the heading triumphantly declared—*Movie* affirmed Bachchan’s huge appeal both in India and in the diaspora. Apart from the predictable news that is the staple of fanzines (an actor’s many affairs with glamorous leading ladies, his love-hate relationship with gossip columnists, and so on), the article isolates two key elements of Bachchan’s personality: a brooding melancholy plus explosive anger. The former is clearly a contrived poetic effect through association with his father, the second a feature of his own filmic personality. What gets stressed again and again is a hero in rebellion, a hero who is egalitarian but introverted and incapable of romance. In short, even as Bachchan is celebrated, the flip side of him marginalizes the female actor and excludes her from the center of the cinema. In this respect, Bachchan altered a major component of the practice of Bombay Cinema, thereby foreclosing, in a sense, the heritage of the female star. Except for Rekha, few female actors of any real power emerged until Madhuri Dixit in the late 1980s. As Rajadhyaksha and Willemen have observed, in Bachchan’s films women can be no more than melodramatic mothers or liberated girlfriends (1999: 49–50).

The change brought about by Bachchan in the traditional concept of the hero (“the latest poet of mass culture,” as Shekhar Hattangadi called him in *Filmfare*, November 16–20, 1978: 20–25) had an enormous impact on Bombay Cinema. The antihero now manipulates the revenge theme (where he can best function) to rewrite the hitherto ridiculed figures of the failed husband (*Do Anjane* [Two strangers], 1976), the innocent turned avenger (*Ganga Ki Saugandh* [I swear on the Ganges], 1978), the hireling (*Sholay*, 1975), and the zealous cop (*Zanjeer*, 1973). As late as *Hum* (1991) the two sides—hero and antihero—function side by side. In this film, “Tiger” (Amitabh Bachchan) runs away from violence only to find that he must return to it years later because the moral order had turned cankerous once again: “When there is adharma on the ascendant, then do I reincarnate myself,” Krishna had told Arjuna in the field of battle. There is something deep-seated here, as if the entire politics of nonviolence did not, finally, lead to the kind of moral uplift Gandhi had in mind when he raised nonviolence to the highest principle of action. Amitabh Bachchan’s anger is possible only in an India no longer comfortable with the Gandhian ideology of nonviolence. Indeed, contemporary India is a very violent nation in which almost unparalleled killings—by the state and by the insurgents—have been condoned. The growth in “private gangsterism and parallel government,” the passing of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act and the introduction of a number of repressive laws (Kazmi 1998: 153) constitute the

backdrop to the Bachchan hero in rebellion. Can one say that Bombay Cinema has quietly (and inadvertently) colluded with the rise of separatist and communal violence in India by justifying, in art, the efficacy and imperative of individual revenge outside of the law? Does sanitized violence in cinema spawn the frighteningly real violence outside? There is, of course, epic antecedent at work here in the figure of none other than Karna, the *Mahābhārata*'s antihero in rebellion, the eldest finally throwing his weight with the enemy. But just as Kunti has no place in Karna's world—the mother's pleas fall on deaf years when Kunti confesses the dark secret of Karna's parentage to him—so women remain totally in the margins of the Bachchan text. Masculine domination is such that Amitabh Bachchan's films are really one-actor genres whose closest counterparts are the Hollywood westerns. The fanzines do not overlook the antiwoman, antifeminist, and sometimes even antimother stance of the Bachchan persona in films. In *Filmfare* (February 1–15, 1980: 17–21), Sheela Naheem points to hints of “misogyny” in Bachchan's films and notes that rarely does the hero enter into “warm heterosexual relations.” Bachchan thus redefines the Romantic hero—the tradition from K. L. Saigal to Rajesh Khanna—and banishes the centrality of romance. Vengeance precludes love; the Jacobean revenger cannot love, as dying Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607) declares at the end, “when we ourselves are foes.” The Amitabh Bachchan hero propels the antihero into that position but does not give him Vindice's voice. In the end, as fanzine critics like Shekhar Hattangadi had noted (*Filmfare* 1978), the genre of revenge itself became exhausted, as did Bachchan. In Amitabh Bachchan's films anger and revenge become rituals which, finally, destroy the idea of “character.” Motivation is replaced by generic predictability; the twist at the end that kept many of the earlier romances in business—will the woman in question return to the hero?—is no longer part of the design of the narrative. For Bombay Cinema to survive, the romantic twist had to return. And so as Bachchan's star waned, romance returned. From *Maine Pyar Kiya* (Yes I've fallen in love, 1989) to Mani Rathnam's *Dil Se* (With love, 1998) and the recent films of the comic-hero Govinda (*Maharaja*, *Dulhe Raja*, *Naseeb* [Destiny], 1997) romance underpinned the social as well as the political and once again became the centerpiece of Bombay Cinema.

As we reconstruct the star personality through the fanzines we also come across carefully placed self-reflections. At the end of the interview with Pammi Bakshi in *Movie* (September 1983), Bachchan frames his own future (and demise) as a kind of a Guru Dutt figure. In a conscious echo of *Kaagaz Ke Phool* and to K. A. Abbas's own account of how he, Abbas, first inter-



Amitabh Bachchan in Tony's *Insaniyat*, 1994. An older Bachchan safeguarding the nation with a semi-automatic. Publicity Still Kamat Foto Flash.

viewed him and offered Bachchan a role in *Saat Hindustani* (Abbas 1977), he projects a future for himself in which the “star” is constructed as an ephemeral being whose name is followed by a director's dismissive comment—“please do not waste my time” (48):

Then one day while shooting with a crowd of about fifty junior artistes, the director will ask his assistant, “Woh crowd mein lamba kaun hai? Familiar lagta hai.”

The assistant will give a second look and say, “Sir yeh woh actor tha na?” “Kaun?”

"Sir, woh Amitabh Bachchan!"

"Achcha, achcha, mera time mat waste karo! Ready everyone?"

"Sound—Camera—Action."

There are three subtexts (the third is primarily nonfanzine based) around the figure of Amitabh Bachchan that I should now wish to examine. The first two are central to his star persona, the third draws us to the links between star and power in Indian culture. The first subtext is Bachchan's relationship with heroines (an important element in the construction of the star); the second subtext is the narrative of his near fatal accident on the sets of *Coolie*. The third subtext—the Bofors affair—was taken up by highbrow journalism in light of his close friendship with Rajiv Gandhi and his very brief foray into Indian politics.

AND THEY CALLED HER REKHA

In the interview already referred to above, Pammi Bakshi asks Amitabh Bachchan, "Where does Rekha stand with you today?" The question is linked to earlier questions about two other leading stars: Zeenat Aman, a onetime Miss India, and Parveen Babi, whose face appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine on July 19, 1976. Both had been romantically linked with Bachchan. In the case of the Rekha question the answer is an abrupt, "What do you mean where does she stand with me *today*? Rekha was my leading lady. *Just that*." The overemphasis in the case of Rekha suggests something deeper in the relationship and requires a second look. Rekha emerged as the consummate Bollywood female actor in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In *Movie* (January 1984) Supriya Pathak said that she had everything: "charm, grace, warmth," and Anita Ray placed her in the tradition of Madhubala, that extraordinarily beautiful face of the 1950s whose haunting looks were put to such effective use by Kamal Amrohi in *Mahal*. Daughter of the Tamil/Hindi actor Ganeshan, Rekha came with classical good looks, a tall frame, and real acting abilities. Although the genre does not require or nurture real acting talent—the scripts do not allow for character development, and the piecemeal nature of the filming procedure (up to five shifts a day on five different films in some instances) makes concentration difficult—Rekha became one of those rare actors who brought a real sense of character to the films. The Bachchan-Rekha affair was extensively documented in the fanzines, and like another more open affair—that of Hema Malini and Dharmendra—it probably added to the growth of what sounds like a quietly sanctioned counternarrative by Bachchan himself. When Amitabh Bachchan began to be hounded by

pop journalists, he finally banned them from his presence, which added to his mystique and to an even more extensive treatment of the relationship in the fanzines. But no such act of censorship took place with *Silsila* (Continuity, 1981), where film avowed through fiction what the star disavowed in the real world: the triangular relationship of Jaya Bhaduri, Amitabh, and Rekha. In Rekha's case the disavowal was considerably less. When the authorities raided her flat for tax evasion, she told *Filmfare* (November 16–30, 1984: 12): "Every woman expects the man she loves should come and support her. But that didn't happen." She reflects, "He wasn't my husband, what duty did he owe me?" Then she constructs an image of herself as the other woman, the seductress who is hated by her lover's family. Without making the point explicit, she more or less implies that had she been Jaya Bhaduri, she would have left him: "Without respect love is nothing." Unlike other stars involved in relationships, such as Nargis and Raj Kapoor, Rekha makes no attempt to rewrite the past, either in real life or filmically. There is, in other words, no film like Nargis's *Lajwanti* (The chaste wife, 1958) in which she symbolically rewrites her past and gives the spectator an alternative narrative of herself.

In isolating this relationship I want to underline the nexus between the construction of a star personality and a star's relationship with his leading ladies. Although Bachchan denied having had an affair with Rekha, we note that he is aware of the importance of the relationship and its use in the fanzines as a crucial component of his own image as star. The star is thus not simply a screen image; he or she is also a product of a fanzine culture that successfully conflates filmic and real lives. Before I move on, there is a coda to this narrative of Rekha that needs to be noted. In February 1990 she married, rather abruptly it appears, a businessman named Mukesh Agarwal. (It must be said that this is not uncommon among Bombay stars. In October 1999, the reigning queen of Bombay stardom, Madhuri Dixit married, equally suddenly it seems, a Los Angeles–based nonresident Indian doctor.) By July, Rekha's marriage had reached a dead end, and within days Agarwal committed suicide (the popular press declared that he hanged himself with Rekha's *dupatta* or shawl) while Rekha was in New York. The marriage was strange to say the least. She had met him only once before. Marriage and a too brief London honeymoon only showed her all the reasons why they should not have gotten married. He wanted glamor and easy entry into the glittering world of Indian cinema, as well as political introductions. Asked by a reporter why she had rushed into this marriage (*Filmfare*, December 1990: 29) she replied: "But there is no logical answer. All I can say is that it was des-

tined to happen. It was God's will." At the time of the interview, she was also making *Phool Bane Angaray* (Flowers became embers, 1991), a film that uncannily echoed her own recent past.

DEATH OF THE HERO OF OUR TIME

On August 2 [1982] I was declared clinically dead. Jaya had gone to the Siddhi Vinayak temple and she rushed back. Panic-stricken she stood outside the ICU [intensive care unit], watching the doctors' attempts to revive me . . . apparently in vain. Suddenly she screamed from outside. Don't give up, I just saw his toe move. Please keep trying. The doctors started massaging my feet upwards. And I came back to life.

In the interview (*Movie*, September 1983) Bachchan continues, "The doctors had told me to report for work sometime in August 1983. I reported on January 7, 1983. And started from where I had left off—the same sequence of *Coolie* that I had left incomplete." Indians have shown their epic capacity to mourn. Singers who die young like K. L. Saigal were mourned by the entire nation. Thousands also lined the funeral procession when two other great singers died: Mukesh and Mohammed Rafi. But nothing in Indian film history—not even the death of Raj Kapoor in 1988—had the same impact on the Indian nation as the weeks in which Amitabh Bachchan lay in a hospital fighting for his life in 1982. As I've done throughout this chapter, I will reconstruct the narrative of what I've called "Death of the Hero of Our Time" from accounts of it in the fanzines, and again as a means of filling out the construction of Amitabh Bachchan as parallel text.

It is a typical Saturday afternoon in July 1982. There is nothing significant in Hindu astrological terms about the date, which is the 24th. And Bangalore, the garden city of southern India, is certainly less humid and sticky than the rest of India, where monsoon rains have held their sway for almost three months. Manmohan Desai (the co-director) is working here on parts of his film *Coolie*, a typically ordinary narrative in the style of the post-*Zanjeer* films of Amitabh Bachchan. The scene being shot is an indoor scene—which could have been filmed in any number of studios in Bombay—in which the hero is punched in the abdomen by the villain. The villain, Puneet Issar, a Kung Fu sixth-degree black belt and karate expert, goes through the rounds of simulating a punch at Bachchan's stomach, then at his face, after which he is to be thrown upon a desk. As a general rule the simple simulated punch would feature Amitabh Bachchan and Puneet, but the more difficult sequence (the falling on the desk) would require the services of a double. It is an ordinary

steel-rimmed office table with drawers made of soft wood or chipboard so that if need be it will easily break upon impact. Amitabh Bachchan, however, thinks the shot will be more realistic if he does both sequences, taking the simulated punch to the abdomen and the face, a sudden fall on the desk, then executing a half-somersault that will land him on the other side of the desk. The director agrees and Bachchan gets his way. The sequences with Puneet Issar and Amitabh Bachchan go very well, and the camera crew does not ask for a retake. However, as Bachchan gradually collects himself, his face tense and discolored, he says he is in some pain. The others check his stomach and see no signs of bruise or cut. Bachchan walks about and goes through the routine exercises of moving himself sideways and bending down to touch his toes. But the pain lingers, and with it a faint, nauseating taste in his mouth. The next day, Sunday, he stays in his hotel all day, his condition worsening, and by nightfall he is in considerable pain, with bouts of loss of consciousness. On Monday he gets himself admitted into St. Philomena Hospital in Bangalore. The doctors take X rays of his chest and abdomen, find no signs of abrasion or broken bones, and shrug off the case. On Tuesday, however, Bachchan is in extreme pain. He is incoherent in his speech, fails to recognize people easily, and confuses names. At this point, as in a Bombay film, enters the figure of Dr. H. S. Bhatt from the prestigious hospital in Vellore. He is shown Bachchan's X rays and immediately spots a dark shade around the intestine area and becomes worried. Seventy-two hours after the accident, the undigested food could have turned poisonous, and the body's immune system would be hard-pressed at this late stage to neutralize the poison in the blood system. The only solution is immediate operation.

Dailies in Bangalore were rife with rumors. Puneet Issar was targeted by all as the villain who had a grudge against stars and had purposefully made his punch lethal. Others changed the fifteen-second sequence into a complicated fight sequence in which fists as well as legs were used. The hero's fall was magnified into a twenty-foot fall. Amitabh Bachchan's screen presence as the indestructible hero made people think that only an extraordinary event could have led to his injury. Yet the accident itself was minor, and as *Filmfare* points out, Amitabh Bachchan was a victim of the "VIP syndrome." "An ordinary man would have been quickly operated upon and survived" (September 1–15, 1982: 12). It was because septicemia had set in that matters became complicated—so complicated, in fact, that for a week he needed a tracheotomy tube to breathe.

On August 2, 1982, Bachchan was declared clinically dead at the Breach Candy Hospital in Bombay. It was then that Jaya screamed from outside the

ICU that she saw signs of life and doctors revived him. His condition deteriorated on August 5, and there was panic in the hospital (*Filmfare*, September 1–15, 1982). Throughout India dramatic scenes were being performed. A child offered to give his life to save his hero. For once there was no shortage of blood donors in India. Both in Bangalore and subsequently at the Breach Candy Hospital in Bombay, pilgrims from all over India came and went. Fans thronged the hospital every day, temples, mosques, churches, and *gurudvārās* were full. The hospital visitors list included Shashi Kapoor, Prakash Mehra, Amjad Khan, Manoj Kumar, and Zeenat Aman. Rajiv Gandhi cut short his American trip to visit his friend in hospital on August 5. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, too, made a “purely personal and private” visit (*Filmfare*, September 1–15, 1982: 11) on August 8. But Rekha did not come, and gossip columnists picked this up, remarking, as if faking Rekha’s point of view, “the hero is a straw dog after all” (*Filmfare*, September 1–15, 1982: 11). A 6 p.m. bulletin was issued daily by the hospital to keep journalists and inquisitive visitors informed. The statements were characteristically vague but comprehensive enough to give journalists something to work from.

The hero survived. And on January 7, 1983, Amitabh Bachchan was back on the sets of *Coolie* to complete the sequence broken off because of his accident. Billboards proclaiming “God is Great! Amitabh is Back” could be seen in cities from Bombay to Patna. When the film—*Coolie*—was released later that year, the producers capitalized on Bachchan’s close encounter with death by freezing the moment of the decisive punch and holding a caption to the frame that explained to the audience the significance of that incident in the life of the nation: the hero of our time becomes pure simulacrum.

THE BOFORS AFFAIR

In 1985 Amitabh Bachchan entered the Indian Parliament from the Allahabad constituency as a gesture of support for his politically inexperienced friend Rajiv Gandhi, who had become prime minister on a sympathy vote following his mother’s assassination the previous October. Two years later, in 1987, Bachchan quit politics. In one sense this was a very natural thing to do—unlike Bombay Cinema, Indian politics cannot be cleaned overnight through the intercession of the angst-ridden modern epic hero. But soon there was talk of underhand deals between Rajiv Gandhi and a Swedish supplier of military hardware. There were persistent rumors that the Swedish firm Bofors had bribed key Indian politicians, including the prime minister, to ensure that the Indian government would buy Bofors’s tanks. In the two years that Bachchan was a parliamentarian he held no cabinet position and

clearly had no direct dealings with decisions made by the cabinet. But he was a close friend of Rajiv Gandhi, he probably had connections with banks, and more important, he had easier access to hard foreign currency than did Rajiv Gandhi himself. In 1987 Bachchan and his brother, Ajitabh (then a Swiss resident) were connected to a forged letter (a letter rogatory) relating to the Bofors purchase. Although both Rajiv Gandhi and the Bachchan brothers denied wrong dealing, allegations of bribery persisted and were a contributing factor in Gandhi’s defeat in the 1989 elections. Immediately upon gaining office the new National Front coalition government led by Prime Minister V. P. Singh began a thorough investigation into Rajiv Gandhi’s involvement in the scandal. In the course of investigations the Swedish paper *Dagens Nyheter* claimed (on January 31, 1990) that one of the six accounts under investigation in the Bofors affair belonged to the Bachchan brothers. Amitabh Bachchan immediately sued *Dagens Nyheter* for libel “for naming him as the man behind a Swiss account containing money from payoffs in the Bofors deal” (*India Today*, August 15, 1990: 39), but the case was not defended. Instead the newspaper editor, Christina Jutterstrom, offered an apology in the English high court on July 19, 1990, in which she said that she had been misled by Indian government investigators. This was followed, in December 1990, with the judge of the Swiss cantonal court clearing the Bachchan brothers of any involvement in the payoff by Bofors. Public scrutiny of the brothers didn’t end there, however. The Singh government opened up investigations (through the Commerce Ministry) into possible tax evasion and violation of foreign exchange laws by the Bachchan brothers. As so often happens in India, another change in government meant that even these investigations were discontinued. The Bofors affair was recounted at various levels in both fanzines (peripherally) and serious journalism (extensively). Some people, it was suggested, did run away with the Bofors booty (by way of payoffs): the Gandhi family, some claimed openly (a charge sheet belatedly filed in a Delhi court on October 22, 1999, named Rajiv Gandhi as one of the accused), the Bachchans quite possibly. In a curious way the years of the scandal (1987–90), following hard on the heels of a disastrous two-year political foray, marked the decline of Amitabh Bachchan as star. Between 1988 and 1990 almost all of Bachchan’s films flopped at the box office. These included *Gangaa Jamuna Saraswathi* (1988), *Main Azaad Hoon* (Freedom, 1989), *Toofan* (The storm, 1989), *Jaadugar* (The magician, 1989), and *Agneepath* (The path of fire, 1990). It wasn’t until August 1990 that something of the old Bachchan reappeared in *Aaj Ka Arjun* (The modern Arjun, 1990) and a year later in *Hum*. The latter led to a lead article in the

Illustrated Weekly of India, February 9–10, 1991, under the title “A Quiet Comeback” in which the success of *Hum* is placed alongside interviews with Bachchan about the Bofors affair.

The correlation between scandal and failure is far too neat, and at any rate no causal connection between the two should be made. The decline of Bachchan as hero, as a parallel text that is, has to do with the 1990s return to romance and song (the key film here is *Hum Aap Ke Hain Kaun*), precisely the kind of things that Bachchan had turned his back on so as to carve out a new space for the Bombay hero. This is not to say that in terms of publicity 1990 was not one of his best years. In May 1990 he performed at the Giants Stadium in New Jersey to a packed audience of forty-five thousand, and four months later, in September, he made a spectacular entry on a white horse for a performance (“Jumma Chumma in London”) at Wembley Stadium. The 1990s, however, saw the arrival of actors in their early twenties with a different modern agenda, as reflected so consummately in Shah Rukh Khan. If the 1970s and '80s are marked by *Zanjeer*, *Sholay*, *Amar Akbar Anthony*, *Deewar*, and *Coolie*, the decisive films of the '90s are *Maine Pyar Kiya* (Yes I've fallen in love, 1989), *Khalnayak* (The antihero, 1993), *Hum Aap Ke Hain Kaun* (Who am I to you? 1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Lovers win brides, 1996), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (The heart is a wild thing, 1997), *Dil Se* (With love, 1998), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Sometimes things do happen, 1998), and the films of the talented comic hero Govinda (*Dulhe Raja*, etc.). The turn of the millennium has created films—*Fiza*, *Mission Kashmir*—that invoke the unity of the Indian nation-state and the new, vulnerable but heroic film sensibility of actor Hrithik Roshan.

I have argued that Bachchan's preeminence in Indian popular films, his status as a star, his social significance, and potential political eminence attest to the power of cinematic discourse. While fanzines can be quickly dismissed as ephemera, and a legitimate claim made that the construction of the star primarily through an English fanzine archive elides the value of fanzines in the vernacular, the position they accord Bachchan is underscored by the more serious Indian press, as shown in *India Today's* treatment of him. Referring to Bachchan's injury while filming *Coolie*, it wrote:

Bachchan, the near indestructible superstar who had battled seemingly insurmountable odds in thousands of celluloid frames, was fighting the most epic and riveting battle of all—for his life. . . . Childhood friend Rajiv Gandhi broke off his trip to the United States . . . among Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's first appointments after her return was a flying visit to see the stricken star. (August 1982: 32)

The uses we have made of the fanzine material provide the kind of commentary that is crucial to the construction of the Dyer and Ellis model. There are, however, some unanswered questions that remain if we return to the heuristic model referred to earlier in the chapter. First, how does Bachchan, or the parallel text, get inscribed into Indian consciousness? What is the nature of the initial moment of text and audience response that leads audiences to flock back to the cinemas? What makes *Deedar*, *Awara*, or *Mother India* films that remain popular because of their respective stars: Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, and Nargis? The Dyer morphology establishes an effective model through which the nature and manner of the dissemination of the star may be grasped. I am not totally convinced, however, that the political economy of the marketing and distribution of star capital can fully explain my conception of the parallel text. There is something symbiotic and emotional, a form of an aesthetic relish in the materiality of the star, something resonating deep in Indian psychology that explains the initial moment of conjunction of star and spectator. It is this that explains why few stars in Bombay Cinema have generated parallel texts. To find that parallel text—one that vies for place with the film itself (as character to plot)—we need to examine the reception of texts beyond the construction of both text and star by the fanzines. We need to examine how two legacies of the tradition of drama and *Tamasha*, of folk performance as well as temple ritual are received by the spectator as these are reworked in the film act. To do this it is necessary that we examine the use of song and the dialogic situation in the construction of the actor as parallel text.

SONG AND DIALOGIC SITUATION

Fanzines are important sources for any reading of popular culture. But the point I have made is that fanzines in India are not read by the film's slum constituency although it is clear that fanzine constructions of stars grow out of slum responses to them. If we are to construct a narrative of how films circulate in this constituency, we need to go back to the oral underpinnings of filmic reception. I want to advance the hypothesis that the parallel text is also constructed and carried by the song and dialogic situation. In other words, the “star” is the product of a “labor” of memory, the essentially “oral” traditions of the Indian, as much as of industry publicity. To isolate this we need to expand the levels that made up our heuristic model. In this argument, our study of the parallel text hitherto arrived at through Dyer and Ellis will be subsumed under the superparadigms of the song and dialogic situation, which may be considered as sites for the identification of actor with specta-

tor. In other words, the symbolic identity of spectator with text/actor has to be located in a theory of narrative transaction that is not identical, in any absolute sense, with the way in which that transaction functions in mainstream Hollywood cinema. In the end the difference reflects both the manner in which the Indian cinematic commodity has come into being (its historical antecedent, its links with a parallel folk culture, its indebtedness to orality, and so on) and a complex theory of Indian textual reception. And, of course, it goes without saying that these two indices are not value free: they are fissured by categories of gender, power (patriarchy), and social class.

In *Cinema Cinema* (1983), a videocassette introduction to Bombay Cinema, the role of the song or the lyric was analyzed in some detail by the two film producers interviewed. Both Kamal Amrohi, himself an Urdu poet and director of *Mahal* (1949) and *Pakeezah* (1971), and Raj Kapoor, actor as well as auteur, found the interweaving of "song" in the filmic narrative a defining characteristic of Bombay Cinema. They argued on the grounds of cultural antecedents and emotional representations (*jazbāt*), indicating through such correlation the inextricable unity of song and character in Bombay Cinema. Amrohi's defense is indeed couched in the language of cultural "difference": songs are a defining feature of Indianness. Birth, growth, marriage, death are all informed by or translated into song. Songs are significant emotional correlatives, they extend dialogue or filmic image. A heroine in distress is either presented through the montage of a severed kite, a storm, or through a song. Like much else in contemporary Indian culture, the latter device—the song as filler—also has an honorable antecedent in the dramaturgical texts. One remembers the well-known episode in Kalidasa's *Śakuntalā* where the director asks his wife to sing a song while the performers are getting ready. Spectators must be entertained or else they will leave, is the argument here. "What do you want me to do?" asks the wife/actor. "What else but to charm our audience with a song," replies the director/dramatist. The actress needs no further coaxing. She knows that at moments like these the song sung should be about nature and seasons. So she sings a song about summer, the season in which the play is being performed (Kalidasa 1981: 42):

Acacia flowers whose filaments
With trembling lips
The bee has known,
Plucked now with careful fingertips,
For ornaments

To women's ears are gone.

The contemporary Indian reader/spectator quickly makes a mental shift at this moment and recalls any number of songs about seasons. A classic song in this style is in the movie *Rattan* (Invaluable jewel, 1944):

O clouds of monsoon months go tell my beloved,
It had to be so, my lover do not cry.
O clouds of monsoon months.

For the stars in question here—Karan Dewan (who is also the male singer) and Swaranlata—the song became their "signature" in the sense that their "star capital" was constructed by the song. There is a moment of synchronicity between playback singer and the actor: the actor text enters popular Indian consciousness through a song syntagm. Before Amitabh Bachchan, no actor without the support of the song had ever become a parallel text in Bombay Cinema, and that includes great stars like Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor. For the Bachchan star personality, it is not song but the dialogic situation, where a dramatic encounter is verbally developed, that is crucial. Thus the ideal dialogic situation is one in which a lengthy debate takes place between two people: mother and son, brother and brother, father and son, hero and villain, mother and daughter, or most important perhaps, man and woman. Film work here, of course, draws attention to the many screenplay writers and lyricists who construct such dialogic situations around the heroes, and this should not be forgotten. In the case of Amitabh Bachchan the dialogues written by the Salim-Javed team were carefully scripted with Bachchan's persona in mind.

SONG AND DIALOGUE IN AMITABH BACHCHAN

Let me expand on Bachchan's dialogic situation by examining a dialogue from *Deewar* (The wall, 1975), which produced two popular critical terms for the dialogic situation: "kyā scene hai" (what a scene!) and "kyā dialogue mārta hai" (what a way with dialogues!). We enter with the camera as it focuses on the face of Ravi (Shashi Kapoor). Ravi's top half occupies the left side of the frame, and he is foregrounded. In the background, at an angle, in the right-hand side of the frame, stands Amitabh Bachchan. The dialogue develops in the following fashion:

Kapoor: No, our principles and our ideals will not let me do this.

Bachchan: Oh! your principles, your ideals. Can they provide you with a square meal? You risk your life for these ideals. What have they given you? A police

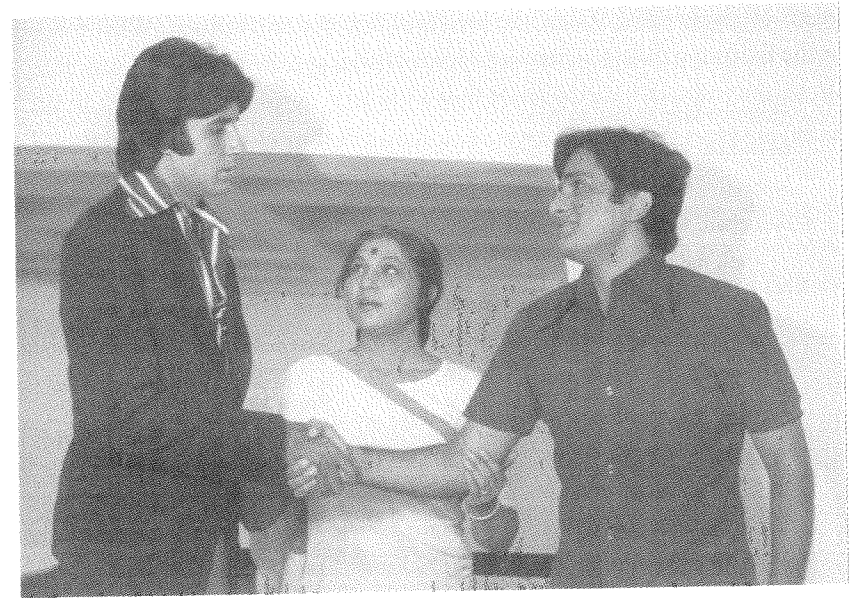
job, a pittance of a salary, rented rooms, two changes of uniform. Look at you and look at me. We grew up on the same footpath. But look where you are today and where I've got to. Today I have property, buildings, homes, cars, a bank balance. What have you got?

[Long pause follows, shot reverse-shot]

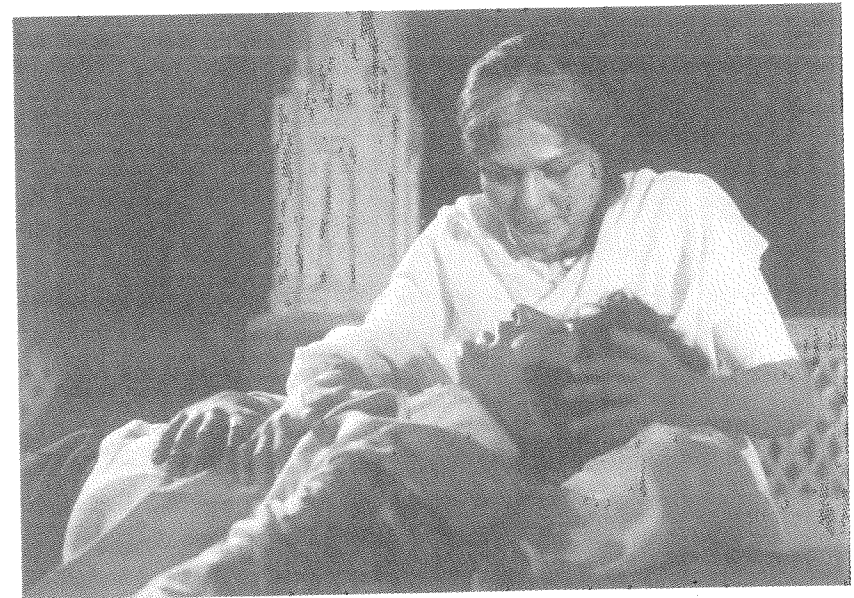
Kapoor: I have a mother.

Bachchan as the elder brother is here abrogating those dharmik laws that go into the making of the elder brother in Indian society. But as a dialogic situation it is indicative of one of the many moments in the construction of Bachchan as parallel text; it is a kind of a *smṛti* discourse, a "memory-text," that audiences would recall and participate in. It is the younger brother who uses words like *wasūl* ("principles" for Urdu speakers) and *ādarś* ("ideals" for Hindi speakers) to establish the higher law. The older brother, normally Rama, the upholder of dharma, is in fact Karna here, the *Mahābhārata*'s hero in rebellion. This essential generic shift from the relatively predictable registers of the pre-Bachchan film also requires a firmer grasp of the ways in which screenplay writers work in Bombay Cinema. My point in recalling this dialogue as an instance of the "dialogic situation" so crucial for the construction of the parallel text is to demonstrate how "memorial reconstructions" of texts work hand in hand with industry publicity to create the "star" in Bombay Cinema. Although the mother (and woman generally) is removed from the emotional discourse of Bachchan, her power remains even as that of woman-as-lover diminishes. In the end Bachchan returns to the arms of his mother. "I feel so tired," he tells her. Motherhood remains something rather special in Bombay Cinema, and even Bachchan's wry cynicism cannot remove her from her central position in Indian culture.

In another well-known instance, Bachchan deconstructs one of the great enabling discourses of Bombay Cinema. I take a segment from *Naseeb* (Good fortune, 1981) in which a very thin line divides a Bombay film's sincerity to its generic conventions and a parody of precisely those conventions. As we enter this dialogic scene a singer-dancer Miss Asha Singh (Hema Malini) is about to be molested by a gang of five thugs led by the son of the evil hotel owner with a complex rags-to-riches history of his own. As she tries to escape from them, doors close around her and she is trapped under a net thrown at her by a female accomplice. She writhes helplessly, shakes and quivers, when suddenly five silver bangles are seen rolling down one of the ramparts of the parking lot toward the thugs. Enter Amitabh Bachchan as John Jani Janardan. After wisecracking about male bullies who should first wear bangles before they molest a girl he beats the daylight out of them. Though crudely choreographed by the stan-



Amitabh Bachchan, Nirupa Roy and Shashi Kapoor in Yash Chopra's *Deewar*, 1975. Mother and sons. Publicity Still, Kamat Foto Flash.



Nirupa Roy and Amitabh Bachchan in Yash Chopra's *Deewar*, 1975. Mother and dying son. Publicity Still Kamat Foto Flash.

dards of *Zanjeer* and *Shakti*, the hero is at any rate triumphant. What follows is the following dialogue between Hema Malini and Bachchan.

Malini: Many thanks to you.

Bachchan: I knew this.

Malini: What did you know?

Bachchan: Where the story will begin. You will first thank me, and then you will ask me my name, and I will reply that my name is John Jani Janardan. Then you will ask how can one man have three names? To which I will reply a Christian mother gave me birth, a Hindu fed me milk, and a Muslim brought me up. Then you will ask me where I live. And I will reply in a hotel. Then you will ask what work I do. I feed people. . . .

Malini: But why do you want to tell me all. . . ?

Bachchan: Wait, please do let me continue. See in every Indian picture this is exactly what happens. The villain molests the heroine with his four thug friends. At the right moment enter the hero. The audience claps. Then the hero mercilessly pummels the daylight out of the villain and the thugs exactly as you have just seen. After that love develops between the hero and the heroine. Then marriage. Happy ending. The audience gets its money's worth. The end.

Malini: Nothing of that sort is going to happen here. There is no picture ("picture-wicture") being made here. I am not used to listening to someone's idle prattle. Could it not be that you hired these thugs so that having overcome them (as you assumed I would have thought) you really wished to impress me? [This is a clear reference to an earlier episode in England, in which Bachchan's childhood friend Vicky (Shatrughan Sinha) helped her out when she was being abducted by a couple of English thugs. Later, one of the thugs told her that Vicky had hired them to stage the abduction so that he could establish his own chivalrous credentials in her eyes.]

Bachchan: What is your name? If this were a film shooting then this is certainly what would have happened. But it so happens that this is not a film shooting, this is reality (*haqīqat*), and if I hadn't arrived on time it would have been the end of you.

The film as *haqīqat* (reality) is not unlike fiction's claim that it is more real than reality. But the parody works because it is done by Amitabh Bachchan, whose star status is such that he can deconstruct the text in which he is star. Earlier in the film there is a scene in which the golden jubilee of a Hindi film, *Dharamveer* (a Manmohan Desai film made in 1977), is being celebrated. Real stars (Dharmendra, Raj Kapoor, Randhir Kapoor, Rajesh Khanna, Waheeda Rehman, etc.) come to this jubilee. Amitabh Bachchan entertains

them with a song ("I have seen all local and English films, and after seeing each one I thought of being an actor"). At the end he asks Raj Kapoor to play the accordion à la *Sangam* (1964), which Kapoor does. At this point in the film Raj Kapoor ceases to be himself as he now simulates the playing of the accordion to playback music. Raj Kapoor enters the *Dharamveer* jubilee as the grand actor of old but leaves it as the character in *Sangam* playing the accordion. Amitabh Bachchan moves in and out of the film as a star whose presence transcends the text. The actor as parallel text, in the case of Amitabh Bachchan, subsumes the text itself.

If the dialogic situation effectively displaces the old song syntagm in Bachchan (the videocassette *Follow that Star: Amitabh Bachchan* has no songs), the song nevertheless is adopted by Bachchan as a different kind of tool for the construction of the parallel text. What we find in Bachchan is the appropriation of Indian folk songs rather than the carefully modulated lyric. Thus in *Laawaris* (1981) Bachchan adapts a well-known North Indian folk song "mere āngane meṁ tumhāra kyā kām hai," (Why are you here in my backyard?) commonly associated with Indian *hijrās* (eunuchs). Bachchan dresses up as a woman to sing this song, which is based on the formula of transforming personal deficiencies into virtues. Thus the song would suggest that husbands with large wives should not despair because, of course, they would not need pillows in bed. This is clearly one type of folk song built around a series of innuendos easily recognized by the audience. A more careful modulation may be detected in *Silsila* (1981), in which perhaps the best known of all folk songs, the *holī* song, is sung by Bachchan. The moment of the song, a ritual that momentarily allows men and women to break the laws governing physical contact, is used to designate Bachchan's desire, in this instance, for a married woman. In his study of carnival, Bakhtin (1968) had drawn our attention to precisely this subversive feature of the moment of the carnival: the lifting of censorship within cultural constraints. As we have already remarked, the film plays on the real-life triangular relationship between Bachchan, his wife (Jaya Bhaduri), and his lover (Rekha). The song "raṅg barase bhīge cunariyā re raṅg barase" (Colors rain upon me, they drench the edges of my shawl), is a clear variation on "holī āī re kanāhī raṅg bhar de sunā re zarā bāmsūrī" (*Holī* has come, fill me with colors, Krishna, to the tune of your flute), which we remember from *Mother India*. But while the *Mother India* *holī* song was meant to reinforce a collective village ethos, Bachchan's song is centered upon him totally and has strong adulterous undertones. The choreography stresses Bachchan's central place in the song text. The point is that in both the *Laawaris* and *Silsila* songs, as well as in the

dialogic situations, Bachchan self-consciously reinscribes himself into the basic laws that govern the construction of the parallel text in Bombay Cinema. There is a clear inscription of the actor into the received tradition of "actor construction," as well as carefully positioned departures from that tradition.

A HERO RECONSTITUTED

I wrote off the hero of our time prematurely. Suddenly in 2000, Bachchan is everywhere, thanks to cable and satellite television. The sources I have used to construct the Bachchan parallel text have been popular print material. In the second half of the 1990s, especially, electronic material became more important. In cyberspace Bachchan has been suddenly reconstituted through his own website, through Internet fan clubs (the Cyberbollywood Amitabh Bachchan site, for instance), and through discussion portals. Additionally Star TV's immensely popular *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (Who wants to be a millionaire?), for which he is the host, has created a new Bachchan who has redefined the role of the quiz master. "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" has many audiences in many languages around the world but nowhere has it received the kind of frenzied following that it has in India, where theaters are rescheduling their evening shows on Mondays to Thursdays so as to not coincide with the program's evening time slot. Launched in July 2000 by Star TV (controlled by Rupert Murdoch's The News Corporation) on the Hindi Star Plus channel, the program seems to have started fierce competition with rivals Zee TV and Sony Entertainment TV since becoming the peak viewing Hindi language program in India, especially in the cities. This is how one of the many Bollywood film portals (www.idlebrain.com) introduces the "new" Amitabh Bachchan:

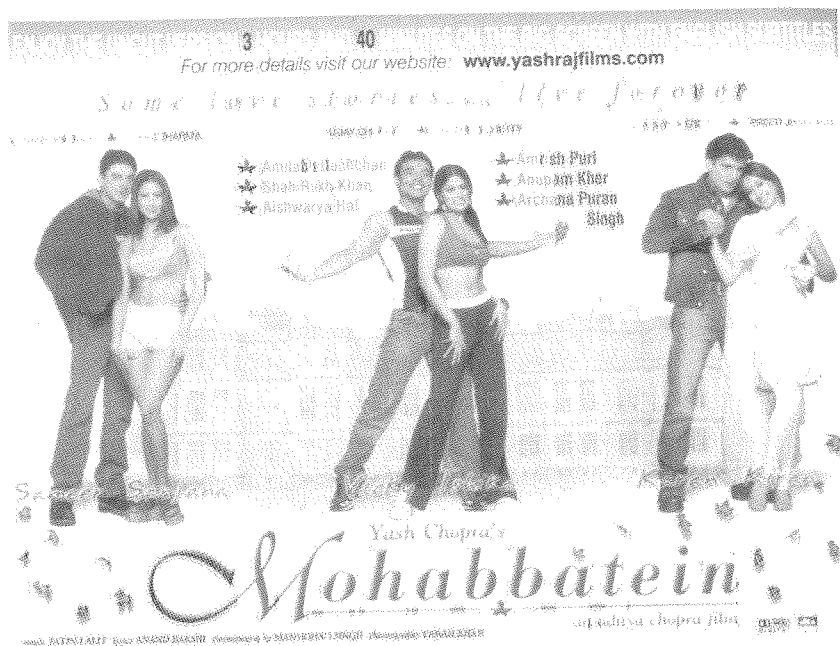
Amitabh Bachchan is on a winning streak of gigantic proportions. . . . He becomes an early visionary, exhibits how a quiz show should be hosted . . . after it seemed as though his on screen glory belonged to the past, he returns triumphantly to the present tense as an actor-star with *Mohabbatein*. The man seems to have worked out some deal with destiny. He had all but hit rock bottom. As a star, after a disastrous comeback, he was dangling dangerously from the edge of the A-list. As a businessman, he was swamped by debts. But within the last few months, what a dramatic reversal of fortunes!

This is a not atypical electronic discourse on Bollywood. For our purpose what it indicates, however, is the enormous resilience of the Bachchan star persona and its reconstitution via pay TV. As the website commentator explains later in the article, Bachchan's success as the disciplinarian rector of a prestigious college (in the film *Mohabbatein*) is directly linked to his Star Plus role as quiz

master. Some of the key phrases used in the quiz—"fifty fifty," "lock kiya jāye"—have become not uncommon spectatorial responses every time Bachchan appears on the screen. The success of Aditya Chopra's *Mohabbatein* (Varieties of love, 2000) (which premiered simultaneously in the Indian diaspora and in Bombay) is thus related to the manner in which the star persona circulates through the medium of TV and on the Internet. With the increasing overlap between cinema and TV (especially cable and satellite) in India and in the diaspora, star persona will be created through the ways in which the image-dominated electronic media project and redefine his or her personality. The many film-oriented TV programs (reviews of films, talk-back shows with actors, and so on) now create the star in a manner that is gradually shifting interest away from fanzines (important as they continue to be) to TV and Internet websites.

Except for my remarks on Internet fan clubs, I have not followed up Bachchan fan clubs in India during the period when he dominated the film industry. It is sufficient to allude to the work of S. V. Srinivas on Chiranjeevi fan clubs (Chiranjeevi is a very popular Telugu film star) and suggest that his observations on these fan clubs could be similarly applied to the Bachchan fan clubs, both print and electronic (1996: 66–83). Srinivas makes two crucial points. The first is the importance of fans in bringing audiences back to theaters, especially since the slab system of taxation (taxation based on the grade of the theater and not on actual ticket sales) means that repeat audiences are crucial for profit. Although fans are not to be seen as working in tandem with theater owners or distributors or even film producers, it is clear that "fans ensure[d] sustained interest in stars." However, and this is Srinivas's second point, fans do contest, and indeed struggle against, the hegemonic constructions of stars by the film industry and are not, contrary to what the dharma police often say, themselves surrogate heroes/anti-heroes in their own social lives (1999). In this way Bachchan fan clubs imbibe critical discourses even as they deploy "the vocabulary of excess, hyperbole, adulation/devotion/admiration" (1996: 68).

In devoting this chapter to the actor as parallel text what I have attempted is to both demonstrate the highly complex way in which the star in Bombay Cinema is constructed and capture the dynamics of spectatorial desire and cinematic construction in the 1970s and 1980s. In the case of Amitabh Bachchan we have argued that his success has been a result of a very careful manipulation of tradition and individual talent: he has imbricated himself in the received tradition of Bombay Cinema even as he has parted company from it and destabilized it. Thus, in studying the parallel text "Amitabh Bachchan" we discover a carefully modulated and subtly self-conscious presence that manipulates the song and dialogic situations (the super-



Publicity poster of Aditya Chopra's *Mohabbatein*, 2000. Bachchan in the afterglow of *Kaun Banega Crorepati*.

paradigms through which this cinematic practice creates its actor texts) to seemingly endless effects. Behind this manipulation (which is intersubjective since the audience “specularly” connives with the parallel text anyway) I think lie carefully positioned departures from earlier formulations of the heroic personality. Responding to modern needs and cultural shifts, especially the shift in the target audience from the middle class to slum dwellers, and yet conscious of his precursor texts in ways the early actors never were, Amitabh Bachchan transcended the status of stardom to become a text in his own right. It is in this context that Bachchan is both ubiquitous (one can speak of pre- and post-Bachchan Bollywood cinema) and a parallel text constructed through a process that goes beyond the construction of “stardom” as outlined by Dyer and Ellis. To deconstruct this text would require skills of a bewildering complexity as well as a consciousness about popular reception through both popular print and electronic media. In India mainstream cinema can be the site for both high and low cultural forms and their aesthetic critiques. To this end, “Amitabh Bachchan” has been an indispensable text around whom almost a quarter century of Bombay Cinema has congealed.