

## Chapter 3

### Making Sense of the Cinema in Late Colonial India

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#### “Cannibals Enjoy Comedies”

In late 1927 or early 1928, the American Trade Commissioner in India, Charles B Spofford, Jr, submitted an extraordinary memo to the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC), a commission of inquiry into the cinema appointed by the colonial Government of India in the autumn of 1927.<sup>1</sup> Hefty to the point of absurdity, Spofford’s memo comprised something like 35 closely typed, single-spaced pages. Its purpose was to defend the cinema in general, and the American cinema in particular, against a rising tide of moralizing condemnation.

Spofford was writing at a time when Hollywood films constituted approximately 80 per cent of the movies being shown on Indian screens.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, he was particularly keen to defuse any apprehensions about untoward ideological effects, to insist that the desire for entertainment was a basic aspect of human nature, and to explain that the cinema could provide such entertainment in a form that was far more universal than anything the world had hitherto seen.

Responding to the mounting British suspicion that American films, with their eroticized egalitarianism, were undermining the civilizing mission, Spofford declared:

There is no intention on the part of American film producers to fill their pictures with propaganda of a nature to subvert certain institutions in other countries. American films do not constitute a 4<sup>th</sup> International. Who really imagines that the images of humanity produced in Hollywood are likely to replace or blow everything native out of the soul of India or Europe?<sup>3</sup> American films are only meant to entertain, whether in India or any other part of the world (Indian Cinematograph Committee [ICC] 1928a IV: 298).

The cinema, in its global diffusion, was bringing light – if not yet enlightenment – to the world’s hinterlands and, as we shall see, laughter to cannibals. In the best evangelical style, Spofford reported the heartening testimony of an Arctic explorer “who told us how the Eskimos enjoyed their movies in the perpetual night which descended upon them in the Frozen North.” Under the subheading “Cannibals Enjoy Comedies”, Spofford then relayed the experience of a Presbyterian Missionary to the Belgian Congo who had screened films in the rural interior to

[H]undreds and even thousands of savages – some of them indeed still cannibals. [...] He told us how he puts up a canvas sheet in a clearing in the wilderness and how the natives sit by hundreds in front of this and in back of it. Of course, for those sitting in back, the lettering of the titles is reversed, but that makes no difference, since they are unable to read anyhow. They laugh as delightedly at the slap-stick antics of our screen comedians as do any of our American audiences, which shows, of course, that human nature is alike the world over (ICC 1928a IV: 305).

This was not simply a matter of pacification through pleasure. Rather, the principle of universal entertainment was, in the final analysis, the true bedrock of social contentment. Building to a climax after a detailed description of the workings and capabilities of Hollywood (not forgetting to mention its host of “canine histrionic talent” (ICC 1928a IV: 330), Spofford proclaimed: “The

world must be amused. Men must have recreation and relaxation. [...] Just as you serve the leisure hours of the masses, so do you rivet the girders of society” (ICC 1928a IV: 326). Indeed:

It has always been so. Back in the days of Rome’s supremacy the cynical poet and satirist, Juvenal, said sneeringly of the Roman populace: ‘All they care for is their bread and their games.’ He needn’t have sneered. The populace did care for their bread and their games – for life and relaxation from life. It was as it should be. Man, whatever his environment, has always felt the same. Therein again lies your explanation of Hollywood (ICC 1928a IV: 327).

One of the recurrent themes in the literature on cinema in the colonial world is that Hollywood films of the silent period often occasioned a kind of moral panic. Some of this panic was simply an importation to India of anxieties and controversies that had already been circulating in Europe and the United States for several decades. The cinema was going to corrupt the young, the unlettered, women or whatever other subaltern population seemed most likely to succumb to its curiously visceral charms. The cinema was tasteless, it was low, it was base and unseemly. Cinema halls were a breeding ground not only for lax moral hygiene but also for physical disease.

Indeed, the archive overflows with impassioned alarmism. The following passage, dispatched in 1925 by one Rattan Barorji Cooper to the editor of the *Bombay Chronicle* is distinctive only by virtue of its singular degree of purpleness:

Sir, with all fairness and frankness I strongly protest against our modern cinema shows. I do not for a moment claim the abolition of this innocent and favourite public resort [although Mr. Cooper would, characteristically, go on to call for more stringent censorship]. But it is only when this innocent pleasure house is turned into a veritable

infernal dungeon where vilest trickeries and rogueries are taught to its frequenters that any one has every reason to protest, and protest vehemently and emphatically. For so many years I have been visiting cinema shows, but with the lapse of every day my abhorrence for them gets greater and greater. I go everytime [sic] with a hope to see something new or original but I am eternally disappointed, and by this time I am practically disgusted. All that I see, and so many others see, is women, wine, gambling, staking, racing, plotting, scheming, murder, roguery, rascality, robbery, trickery, prudery, sycophancy, pomp, magnificence and a host of other vices.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Cooper's letter manifests a telling tension. His tone strives, on the one hand, for a pitch that might match the sensory intensity of cinema-going itself. On the other hand, he also tries to enumerate the determinate forms of the cinema's crimes, as if an adequately capacious taxonomy might contain, and thus somehow control, the troubling mediations of the movies. In India, among both British officials and indigenous elites of the kind to which the vehement and emphatic Mr. Cooper belonged, these fears were inevitably diffracted through anxieties of empire and racial hierarchy. The European discourse on the roiling energy of crowds during this period rested quite routinely upon a metaphorical equation of the modern urban crowd and an impressionable state of childlike savagery. In the colonies, this metaphor ran right up against its own reality, where emerging mass publics – including cinema audiences – were substantially comprised of individuals that British colonial thought quite literally classified as childlike savages.

This sense that the cinema possessed an intensity that was not simply something to be contained or limited but also carefully harnessed and deployed was quite typical of the discourse of the period. The American Trade Commissioner Charles Spofford appended to his memo the

words of several contemporary authorities on the cinema. Among these none was more infamous than Will Hays, the man who within just a few years would give his name to the obscenity-busting Hollywood production code that ruled the American business well into the 1960s. True to his position as a representative of industry interests, Spofford insisted on a solidly market-liberal approach to evaluating the films of his country: “There is nothing much wrong with them, for if there was, it is scarcely likely that every week 50,000,000 people would patronize the picture houses and would come out of them smiling and satisfied, saying to each other ‘When shall we go again?’” (ICC 1928a IV: 300). But Hays, embroiled as he was in debates on cinema censorship, refuses to equate films with commodities-in-general: “Motion pictures are not dead things, to be regulated like commodities such as freight and good. They are not wares, to be monopolized and traded in by tickets and statues, or marked like iron and soap. They contain a potency of life in them to be as active as the soul whose progeny they are” (ICC 1928a IV: 309).

Now this attribution of vital energy to films is worth some attention, because Hays’ comment was not an isolated or eccentric figure of speech. Indeed it was very much at the root of contemporary concerns over the risks and the possibilities of the cinema. And in colonial India, the problem took on a special urgency: was the cinema, visceral as it was, beyond the pale of an imperial pedagogy? Were the spectacular, performative forms of the British colonial project – such as they were – at odds with the short-cut mimesis of the cinema? Or was the cinema precisely the elixir that the Raj required, an intimate, sensuous engagement on a mass scale that might finally enable a *felt* connection between colonial subjects and their alien government?

At the root of this British ambivalence lay the intimation that Hollywood had solved the global communicational puzzle by deploying a hypermodern technology to resonate with a savage sensorium. Colonial officers were not alone in their suspicions. Rachel Moore (2000) has

shown how early European film theorists – Epstein, Benjamin, Balazs, Eisenstein, Lindsay and others – posited a kind of radical and often romantic connection between the cinema image and ‘savage thought.’ The ICC’s final Report, published in the summer of 1928, argued that cinema worked by an appeal to the more basic “human emotions,” an appeal that presumably worked for audiences everywhere. And yet at the same time, it also noted that Indians seemed preternaturally pre-adapted to its mode of address: “Despite some evidence to the contrary we are fully satisfied that Indians gain the cinema sense very quickly – the uneducated sometimes more quickly than the educated” (ICC 1928b: 112).

So could an apparently savage medium be adapted to a civilizing mission? On the one hand, the cinema presented the British in India with an unprecedentedly efficacious means for conveying the blandishments of civilization. On the other, precisely the conditions of the cinema’s efficacy – its startlingly visceral appeal to the senses – seemed to implicate it in precisely that infantile, even savage sensorium that marked the uncivilized. As Rachel Moore puts it: “Technology, as manifested in cinema at least, created a different mode of perception more equipped to work in the new dimensions and at the new speeds that characterize[d] the advent of modernity. At the same time, the cinema forced a re-encounter with that which progress was meant to have left behind. (Moore 2000: 53-54)

From the 1820s onward, and particularly after the great rebellion of 1857, the British had striven to distinguish their forms of life in India from those of their subjects. The stiffly Victorian-bourgeois comportment of the imperial *sahib* displaced the more porous engagement of the Company nabob (Collingham 2001) while the British sequestered themselves away from the native towns in their civil lines, military cantonments and hill stations. The apparent humanitarianism of the white man’s burden increasingly depended upon a radical discourse of

racial difference. During the pre-imperial, East India Company phase of the British presence in India, the foreign interlopers had sought legitimacy by observing ritual forms of tribute and obeisance to Mughal rulers and local kings, even as their advance across India steadily ‘hollowed out’ the political power of these polities. After 1857, with the Mughals gone and the Empire installed, the British found themselves increasingly conscious of their self-imposed alienation from what C A Bayly (1996) calls Indian “affective knowledge.”

Bernard Cohn (1983) has given us a wonderfully wry description of British experiments with harnessing indigenous rituals of royal incorporation and spectacular display to the legitimation of empire. Lord Lytton, who served as Viceroy between 1876 and 1880, famously insisted that “The further East you go, the greater becomes the importance of a bit of bunting.” Conventionally, the remark gets read as an expression of the Raj’s more or less reluctant concession to the natives’ love of *tamasha* or spectacle. But as Thomas Metcalf points out, Lytton himself was a “romantic medievalist” (1995: 76), enthusiastically developing a whole heraldic system of insignia for the Imperial Assemblage of 1877, at which India’s princes were to perform their loyalty to the Queen-Empress Victoria (Wheeler 1877).

The spectacularization of imperial power during these years was neither confined to the colonies nor necessarily dependent upon an archaic symbolic repertoire. In England, emergent forms of commodity spectacle were energetically being adapted to the public reinvention of royal authority (Richards 1990), even as new branded consumer goods both popularized images of empire to Europe (McKenzie 1984) and represented empire around the world (Burke 1996; McClintock 1995). Perhaps more than any other medium, the cinema – which emerged almost simultaneously in Europe and in India in the middle of the 1890s – represented at once the raucous culmination of this new mass culture and the promise of an unprecedented instrument of

propaganda. And in India, the cinema appeared on the scene precisely at the time when the more creatively populist wings of anti-colonial mobilization were capitalizing on the affective deficit that haunted the Raj by forging a direct connection between the intimate aesthetics of popular cultural forms and nationalist struggle (Freitag 1990; Kaur 2003).

Writings on Hollywood in the colonial world often imply a dialectical interpretation: these films, saturated as they were with a new globalizing consumerist ontology, nevertheless also, through a kind of ruse of history, served a genuinely liberatory and democratizing purpose by helping to displace the repressively racist social hierarchies of European colonialism. For starters, this kind of argument would have to be confronted with the fact that, as Prem Chowdhury (2000) points out, during the 1930s and 1940s Hollywood was churning out so-called empire films that were so jingoistically pro-imperial and so clumsily racist that the Raj itself had to request restraint from American producers. More interestingly, it seems to me, the cinema appeared to the British both as a frightening extension of the culture-mobilizing vernacular protests that they were increasingly trying to contain *and* as a potential weapon by which they might be able to tackle their opponents on their own terrain.

### **A New World Space of Publicity**

By the 1920s, Hollywood was well on its way to global dominance. In the United States, the regulatory initiatives that had culminated in the Hays Code (developed in 1930, made binding in 1934) were coming into view (French 1997[1995]; Jowett 1999). The irresistible rise of Hollywood was causing significant anxiety in the non-American world; in many European countries, the imposition of import quotas on film was linked to strivings toward the forging of national cinematic autonomy (Levin 1999; Vasey 1999). In this emergent space of world

publicity, the promise of instant enlightenment was always shadowed by the fear of global contagion. In particular, the experience of the Great War brought home to governments, with some urgency, the potentials of the new technologies and channels of mass mediation (Mattelart 1994). From this standpoint, the growing obsessions with the possibilities of propaganda and with the need for censorship were two sides of the same coin.

As I have suggested, there was anxiety as well as excitement about the sensuous force of the new medium, whose effectiveness – and therefore also its danger – was understood first of all to reside in its appeal to the senses rather than to the intellect. The cinema would therefore be of especial utility – and of especial concern – when it came to communicating with the uneducated and the unlettered. Whether it was the communists or the Western imperialists, the world stage of cinematic publicity was understood to be a volatile one in which, as a 1926 article in the *London Times* famously put it, the “simple native,” “very deficient in the sense of proportion,” was being subjected to wholly unprecedented provocations.

In India, the 1920s also saw a mass nationalist public come into being, especially around that galvanizingly charismatic publicist, Mahatma Gandhi. But the nationalist movement’s relation to the cinema was notably ambivalent. This should not have been surprising in the case of the Oxbridge-educated nationalists, schooled in paternalist condescension for the popular. But Gandhi himself, despite – or perhaps because of – his exquisitely-tuned understanding of the public efficacy of mass corporeal spectacle mustered only a terse response to the ICC’s questionnaire. The following three sentences were, famously, all he sent from his Sabarmati ashram: “Even if I was so minded, I should be unfit to answer your questionnaire, as I have never been to a cinema. But even to an outsider, the evil that it has done and is doing is patent. The good, if it has done any at all, remains to be proved” (ICC 1928a IV: 56).

Gandhi's personal dismissal of the cinema didn't stop the Indian movie business from constantly affixing his name and likeness to its products during the 1920s and 1930s (Chowdhury 2000). Nor did it prevent the British from sensing an affinity. Constance Bromley, former manager of the Opera House cinema in Calcutta warned in the pages of the *London Times* around the time of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement that "Scores of unsuitable serial films still find their way on to the screens in hundreds of native cinemas, a first-class handbook to the teachings of Mr. Gandhi" (Bromley 1922).<sup>5</sup> The British may not have been entirely mistaken. Although the majority of the films of the period were certainly beyond the pale of a Gandhian body politics, they shared with the latter an insistence upon calling into question imperially approved demarcations between public life and intimate concerns.

Print was already a mass medium in India by the turn of the twentieth century, but one whose impact was constrained by limited literacy. Newly politicized popular practices – such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak's nationalist refunctioning of the Ganesh festival in Western India (Kaur 2003) – were, on the other hand, thought to be more affectively powerful, but their impact was more or less limited to their performative setting. Crucially, the cinema bridged this gap, because it united in an explosive way the mass reach of print with the corporeal appeal of theatrical and ritual performance.

Such communicative force needed equally forceful containment – and one sees this impulse at work in the taxonomical frenzy of the early film censor boards. For example, the British Board of Film Censors report of 1920 contains no less than sixty-seven separate categories of unacceptable representations and themes. Almost without exception, the political potentials and risks of the cinema were closely associated with the erotics of the screen image. And these erotics were, within the moralizing calculus of an imperial pedagogy, usually and

reductively literalized as sexual. The same 1926 *London Times* article that I just mentioned complains that the diffusion of the cinema in “the tropical world” is diminishing the prestige of Europeans and, to add insult to injury, probably preparing the ground for communist agitation as well. But the moments of actual cinematic *reception* that are invoked are directly sexual, typically involving “prolonged and often erotic exhibitions of osculation.”

At the same time, the colonial administration found itself repeatedly attracted to the propagandistic claims made by a motley crew of entrepreneurs about what the cinema might do for the teetering Raj. In the words of one such, the cinema was “admittedly the greatest educational agency of our time – an agency which has the unique advantage of instructing the uneducated with a completeness rivaling that of the ordinary methods which penetrate the consciousness of the educated classes only.”<sup>6</sup> The colonial government had always insisted that its true and unshakable constituency was, precisely, the uneducated masses, the simple folk whose ‘natural’ interests were in fact inimical to the hotheaded verbiage of the nationalist agitators who claimed to speak for them. Any medium that might make the government’s case in the language of this silent majority was not to be ignored.

### **Savage Screen**

Many existing critical studies of Hollywood in the colonies have suggested that the subversive force of the movies resided in the viewpoints and identifications that they – often unwittingly – offered colonized audiences. Particularly troubling was the relatively intimate view of white women that the screen offered for the viewing pleasure of brown men. Indeed, this was precisely the concern that the alarmists of the 1920s harped on and bequeathed to the ICC. The records of the committee’s proceedings, however, show its members constantly struggling with the

limitations of this anxiety. Typically, the committee would ask their informants for examples of particular kinds of objectionable content or scenes, and receive answers that were generally so vague, so obviously chauvinistic or so illogical as to drive the committee's formidable chairman, Mr. Rangachariar, to the point of exasperation.

Pushed harder, many informants would point beyond specific representations or subject matter to a *generally* unsettling quality in film, a tendency to stir up or agitate audiences. Mr. Dwarkadas, Secretary of the Bombay Vigilance Association, spoke of "scenes which violently shake and upset the emotions [...] They stimulate the quickly-excitabile emotions of children and adolescents in a wrong way" (ICC 1928a I: 262). "Sensuous films" were particularly likely to produce "high excitement" in the impressionable (ICC 1928a I: 644), to "stimulate uncontrolled passions" (ICC 1928a II: 1085), again, particularly among the young and/or the uneducated sections of the population.

If no conclusive causal links could be established between behaviour shown in films and subsequent behaviour in spectators' lives, a more generalized vulnerability of the nervous system could nevertheless be posited. H C Mukharjee of Amalgamated Newspapers in Calcutta worried that constant exposure to "these thrilling scenes" would have "a bad effect on the nerves" of youth. "Constant thrills have an injurious effect upon the human mind, speaking psychologically. You see a harassing thing and it tells upon your brain and makes undue demands on the mind" (ICC 1928a II: 1019). U B Romesh Rao of the Radha Picture Palace in Calicut similarly felt that "the Western serials are unnecessarily and injuriously working on the nerves of the audiences by depicting hair-raising stunts" (ICC 1928a III: 446).

Other respondents pursued something like a comparative ontology of media, suggesting that the cinema image was "much more striking" than the printed word (ICC 1928a II: 556), and

more liable to make “a lasting impression” (ICC 1928a II: 339) than either print or oral discourse. The moving picture’s quality of being so incomparably “full of life” (ICC 1928a II: 509), appeared both beneficial and treacherous. On the one hand, as a Trivandrum chemistry professor argued, the inherent fascination of moving pictures promised to make both the producer’s and the consumer’s tasks easier: “The demonstrative value of pictures saves a person from a heavy strain on his imagination and his faith” (ICC 1928a III: 461). The value of the cinema lay not just in its communicative facility but also in its immersive appeal. Bhagwat Prasad, a Lucknowi judge, enthused:

The Picture House possesses all the attractions of real life. We find ourselves in the midst of people in the screen and become interested in them. Our tears for their sorrows and our delight at the successes are immediately called forth. The effect which is produced in our minds is instantaneous and it is not soon effaced. We hear an orator and are impressed. Modern novels move us by their reality, but the greater reality of this vivid presentation of everyday life before our eyes moves us more readily and almost more deeply (ICC 1928a IV: 108).

And yet precisely this “vivid presentation” was understood by others to be the mark of cinema’s lack vis-à-vis, say, the novel. In its apparent bypassing of reasoned judgment, the cinema was, par excellence, the medium of the crowd, of the masses. Some worried that precisely its facility constituted its greatest danger. Reflected a judge of Peshawar, Mufti Abdul Latiff: “In my view there is much difference between novel reading and seeing a thing in the cinema. In the one case one’s own brain is reasoning things out, while in the other the actual thing is shown on the screen, which is quite different” (ICC 1928a II: 276).

Indeed, the spatial arrangement of the audience in the cinema halls was itself imagined on a sliding scale from rabidity to reason. The cheaper seats were downstairs and in front. The people who sat there were, literally, both inferior and more intimately absorbed in the image on the screen and, as such, assumed to be incapable of critical distance. The fancier folk sat in the balconies further back, at a safer distance from the distracting force of the image as well as physically elevated above and behind the rabble, which they could survey without being so easily examined in return.

To those who had access to a more elevated vantage point, nothing was so immediately indicative of the dangerously infantile fusion of screen and mass than the raucous noises emitted by the great unwashed in the cheap seats. Then as now, the theme was obsessive. Many elite ICC respondents, frustrated by their inability to present coherent evidence of objectionable image-content, would often end up pointing to the palpable excitation triggered in audiences by the films as corporeally concrete index.

At times, the effect would be described as a pregnant, barely contained agitation in the cinema hall, a kind of audible thickening of the air. Lieutenant-Colonel Gidney, an all-India representative of Anglo-Indians and “domiciled Europeans,” reported that “when there is anything suggestive [on the screen] there is often a sort of hushed silence and suppressed extasy [sic] over the suggestion” (ICC 1928a II: 1082).<sup>7</sup> But containment did not appear to be the rule. One Karamchand Bulchand, involved in the production of educational and propaganda films, remarked: “You have only to visit a downtown cinema to see how the lower classes of people gloat over scenes when there is kissing or embracing [...] I wish you could come and hear the screeches and howls of the audience when the kissing is going on” (ICC 1928a I: 679, 684). *En masse*, these responses conjure all the acoustic density and variety of a veritable bestiary in the

stalls: “hissing and jeering” (ICC 1928a I: 51), “catcalls and exclamations” (ICC 1928a I: 248), “hooting” (ICC 1928a II: 275), “shouting and Ah-Ahing” (ICC 1928a II: 225). Indeed, on occasion the atmosphere apparently became so charged that the cinema management felt obliged to stop the film and turn on the lights until the audience could be subdued (ICC 1928a II: 380). If the perceived threat of the cinema was moral as well as physical, then it was moral *because* it was so physical. “All you have to do,” averred H W Hogg, Secretary of the Punjab Boy Scouts’ Association, “is sit in the cinema and listen to the remarks made by some of these young men, just to realize how this thing is getting really under their skin” (ICC 1928a II: 69).

In India, as Brian Larkin (nd) and Poonam Arora (1995) have both pointed out, the cinema hall provided a novel and uneasy space of physical proximity in which – for the first time in many decades – Europeans attended the same entertainments as Indians, and social elites shared an auditorium, if not still a seating area, with the less privileged. The obsessive focus on audience noise may certainly be interpreted as a mark of the anxiety aroused by the possibility of the Indian spectator’s gaze lustfully traversing the distance between the white women on the screen and those in the theatre. (The situation was somewhat different in many parts of British Africa during this same period, where a much more rigorous separation of whites and non-whites was enforced at the movies).

But I would also like to take into account the possibility that some of this anxiety was a response to the novelty of the cinema *as* a mass medium. Benedict Anderson (1991) has, of course, given us a theory of nationalism in which the impersonal simultaneity of what he calls print capitalism made it possible to imagine a national public/collective which consisted not only of individuals who would never physically interact but who could also be imagined as formally equivalent under the abstract sign of citizenship. The cinema in colonial India shared something

of this property, what one might call ‘the open edge of mass publicity.’ But the colonial context also brought to the fore the obverse of this open edge, namely its unknowability. The cinema was troubling to colonial governmentality not only because it brought together populations that were supposed to keep at least at arm’s length from each other. More than this, it served as a constant reminder of the coming-into-being of an abstract, general public, unknowable in its contours – not necessarily nationalist, not necessarily activist, but certainly excessive to the categories of what Nicholas Dirks (2001) has called “the ethnographic state.” The bestial noises emerging from the pit were thus at once an index of an uncomfortable proximity and an unsettling anonymity. The complacent certitude with which the administrative files speak of ‘the masses,’ of ‘coolies’ and of ‘the uneducated’ as if these are known quantities is constantly haunted by its corollary question: ‘who *are* these people?’

### **The Filmic Image**

The question of the identity of cinema audiences – whether generic or specific – was never entirely separable from that of the nature of cinema images. Indeed, one could say that the discourse on cinema regulation, then as now, relies on two intersecting constructs. The first is that of the unacceptable image, the second is that of the susceptible audience. In this and the following section, I would like to examine each of these constructs a little more closely, before moving towards a series of concluding reflections.

Some have, as we have seen, argued that the cinema was threatening to colonial authorities because the camera eye seemed to reverse the surveying gaze of the administration, granting the brown masses apparently intimate access into the private spaces of European life. A spectacular scopophilia in which the intrusive close-up combined with the life-like moving

picture breached the distance that was the precondition of the charismatic authority of the whites. As ICC chairman Rangachariar put it in conversation with a local notable in Trichinopoly: “is not that a difficulty about the cinema, that it really removes the wall of one’s private house and exhibits your private life[?] I mean to say what happens in a room is shown on a screen” (ICC 1928a III: 997).

And yet alongside these themes – the reversal of the gaze, the refiguring of the relation between the public and the private – or, perhaps better, *embedded within* these themes was a persistent attempt to describe something that was seen as still more fundamental. With mounting frustration, the members of the ICC – and especially Rangachariar – demanded of its informants how one might presume effectively to regulate something as apparently evanescent as the cinema. In a characteristic exchange, L K Mitter, an Assistant Public Prosecutor in Mandalay, when pushed to identify exactly what details he found troubling in the cinema image, pointed beyond distinct contents to something more along the lines of attitude, the potentialities implied, the habitus that seemed implicitly to organize the elements of the image: “[It is] not exactly the scanty clothing. It is the gestures and the postures which are suggestive of something more gross, to which I object” (ICC 1928a III: 675). After a similar round of attempted specification Owen Roberts, a Member of the Legislative Council (MLC) in Punjab, proceeds by way of an analogy to the then recently published sensational expose on Indian civilization by American author Katherine Mayo: “I have been thinking how I could put it to you. You know the publication *Mother India*. Well, the facts in it may be correct but one puts it down to the feeling that the whole thing is wrong, that the perspective of the book is wrong and that it does not do justice to the country. It is the same thing with these films” (ICC 1928a II: 196).

Perhaps the single most frequently mentioned formal source of discomfort was the close-up. Now it hardly requires repeating that the close-up involves a spatial transformation of the audience's relation to that which the image represents, both in the sense of providing a new, intimate access to that object and in the sense of allowing for audiences to identify with the spectatorial position implied by the camera eye. And of course, in a colonial setting, this transformation had potentially subversive implications. What, as one Indian journalist mockingly put it, were these poor natives going to make of such proximate "sidelights on the Sahib at play"?<sup>8</sup> But there is also evidence in the ICC transcripts to suggest that the close-up generated anxieties that were less about viewpoint and more about the camera's qualitative transformation of its objects.

During the course of the ICC's peregrinations, both the Committee and their respondents regularly struggled to specify the relationship between the close-up and the sense of indecent intensity that it so frequently seemed to evoke. At the most general level, one might say that the close-up was, in several ways, associated with anxieties over intemperate disproportion. For example: the art of silent film-making, many insisted, necessarily led to overacting and, more generally, to the kind of corporeal exaggeration of sentiment and gesture to which uncivilized peoples were thought to be prone. As the British Board of Film Censors put it in its 1920 Report: "The besetting danger of the cinema in the expression of emotion is almost inevitably over-emphasis in action" (O'Connor 1920).

Predictably, an important fulcrum of this debate – as indeed it was in Britain around the turn of the century (French 1997[1995]) – was the screen kiss. In today's discussions of Hindi film, the unwritten prohibition on kissing (which appears to have stretched from the 1940s to its partial breaching in the 1990s) has become both the *bête noire* of cosmopolitan critics and, in a

more allegorical mode, a figure for the apparent impossibility of domestic intimacy in the mainstream Hindi cinema (Prasad 1998). It has become customary nowadays to figure the post-Independence era as puzzlingly prudish in this regard, by recalling that there appears to have been a healthy quota of kissing in early Indian films.

To be sure, the ICC certainly encountered the odd kiss-booster on its travels. One particularly lively written submission from S Nanjundier, a cinema buff in Rangoon, affirmed that “Some sentimental and over-modest people may not like *kissing* to take place in the public gaze and more especially *long* and *lingering kisses*. Without such kisses at the appropriate time the play [film] will be insipid and dry. [...] People who revolt against kisses perhaps like warm and half naked dances; so far it is creditable and I thank them for the [sic] small mercies” (ICC 1928a IV: 263, original emphasis).

But in general, the ICC transcripts are full of adjectivized attempts to express the crossing of an affective boundary in which the kiss marks the crucial spot. What is objectionable, again, is not so much the literal substance of the act depicted, but rather the mode of its dramatization: the “*pregnant sex film*” (ICC 1928a I: 6), the “*frantic*” or “*gushing love scenes*” (ICC 1928a I: 367, 373), the “*strenuous kissing and this violent hugging*” (ICC 1928a II: 993, all emphases added). Visual précis of intimacy that it was, the kiss became the fount of a startling profusion of varieties. Something of this dramatic versatility was captured by Pherozechah Marzban, the editor of the stalwart Parsi periodical *Jam-e-Jamshed*: “Kissing may be here and there, but not indiscriminate kissing. You have got the long kiss, the prolonged kiss, the hot kiss and the soft kiss, all sorts of kisses” (ICC 1928a I: 497).

While for some the besetting sin of the close-up was exaggeration, others identified an effect more akin to temporal – and perhaps, for the audience, cognitive – retardation. Punjabi

Scoutmaster Mr. Hogg explained: “What I object to is the ‘close up,’ where you get a man and woman standing for a considerable time, the slow movement of either the man or the woman putting his or her hands over the shoulders of the other. I mean, the whole thing is deliberately and slowly done, and that, to my mind, is certainly undesirable” (ICC 1928a II: 73). Some actually went so far as to suggest quantitative limits: “You can even define that the kissing should be only for one second or some such thing. But kissing for 30 seconds or even one minute is not proper, I think. It affects every man who sees the film” (ICC 1928a III: 981).

Of course, there was a great deal of talk about the fact that Indians, unlike Europeans, did not kiss in public and that on-screen kissing in Indian cinemas – whether by Europeans or Indians – was for this reason problematic. Ostensibly, then, it was a matter of simple cultural difference. But many of the ICC’s informants kept returning to the uncomfortable way that the camera transformed the kiss. Again, there was a sense of the close-up creating discomfort through its forcible disruption of the normalized proportions and rhythms of everyday life. J Henderson, a Lahore College Principal and member of the Punjab Censor Board, remarked to the ICC that the screen kiss, unlike ‘real life’ public kissing between Europeans, was never “a passing kiss” (ICC 1928a II: 5).

The cinema image was perceived as too slow, too fast, too close and too distant. In its lingering fixity and probing intimacy, the camera eye – particularly in close-up – seemed complicit with the languid, sluggish sensuality routinely attributed to tropical populations. At the same time, the cinema also seemed to enjoy an uncanny affinity with the natives’ savagely accelerated but necessarily superficial mimetic capacities. The headmaster of Mylapore High School, Krishnaswami Ayyar, described the effect of the cinema on his students thus: “It is

artificial mimicry but carried to excess. [...] The point is every odd moment they can snatch they indulge in imitations and they are very sincere but lamentable imitations” (ICC 1928a III: 71).

Underlying all this one senses an anxiety triggered by the cinema’s capacity to denaturalize the naturalized mediations of colonial life, to open up – in a sensuous rather than primarily a discursively critical register – the routinized relationships between bodily experience and ideological truth that a nineteenth-century colonial pedagogy had bequeathed. The perceived threat was sense untempered by sensibility – a condition already diagnosed as chronic by many contemporary critics of the dawning mass society in Europe and the United States.<sup>10</sup> In some ways, then, the cinema was scandalous because its spatio-temporal gimmickry sat awkwardly with the stately unfolding of an approved imperial *Bildung*. But from the point of view of publicity, its striking affective intimacy seemed at once perilous and promising.

### **The Cinema Sense and Imperial Pragmatics**

Doubtless, audiences – when not simply bored or restless – were enjoying themselves. But did they understand what they were seeing? The colonial mimic man sitting in the cinema hall was, in the debates of the time, figured as a kind of spectatorial *idiot savant* – a cynical innocent who understood both nothing and everything about these flickering images. On one level, the working administrative theory posited that colonial audiences needed to be protected from the cinema because they lacked the cultural and aesthetic prophylaxis – generally glossed as a European-style education – that would enable them to exercise proper judgment vis-à-vis what they were seeing. On another level, the British suspected the cinema itself of being a strangely savage medium because of the way that it addressed its audiences so affectively, so corporeally, because it addressed them in a language they understood all too well.

For the British, the fact that Hollywood seemed capable of producing the most popular films confirmed their long-held suspicion that American civilization was in some sense fundamentally childish.<sup>11</sup> And yet it also set off a jealous anxiety (exacerbated by self-consciousness about the affective deficits of colonial governmentality) around whether the British Empire was ever going to be able to harness this kind of communicative magic for its own ends. On the one hand, the alleged Indian predisposition to a “cinema sense” was understood as a primitive tendency to become unproductively –perhaps dangerously – absorbed in the hypnotically diverting play of light and shadow. On the other, many colonial officers were keen to exploit the propagandistic potentials of the then-current belief that the “oriental” had “a firm belief in the veracity of the camera” (quoted in Woods 1995: 543). The compelling link between the gestural emphasis of the (silent) cinema, Indians’ purported corporeality, and the needs of colonial publicity was encapsulated in the reflection offered to the ICC by E Villiers of the European Association in Calcutta:

You have got a peculiarly constituted people, they are intensely dramatic in thought and action. When you see a cooly [sic] and talk to him you realize how intensely dramatic he is. Their language is a very graphic language, much more than the Western, and that is a material which could be made very much better use of (ICC 1928a II: 957).

Many felt, of course, that the sensuous short-cut of the cinema was the devil’s work, precisely because it combined engagement with incomprehension. L K Mitter, a Public Prosecutor in Mandalay, remarked: “Western films are too rarely intelligible to the uneducated class. The result is that they form a low opinion of the people” (ICC 1928a III: 677). And Dorothy Jinarajadasa of the Indian Women’s Association in Madras shuddered at the sense of an elevation which was more priapic than proper:

[A]lso you can tell from the way the audience behave that when they see a thing which excites them emotionally, scenes between men and women and drinking and racing and that kind of thing, you can tell from the kind of way they applaud or cheer that it is not having at all an elevating effect on them. It does not help them to self-control or purity of mind. It debases them, this kind of thing, even if they don't understand exactly (ICC 1928a III: 113).

But others speculated that the civilizing project might actually finally take wing by means of the cinema image. In a country where poverty and illiteracy meant that few could afford to 'see the world,' the cinema offered an opportunity to bring the world to the remotest village. In the words of Dr K L Moudgill, the Trivandrum chemistry professor I quoted earlier:

I would deprecate and I believe a very large majority of educated Indians would deprecate any attempt that is made to prevent the Indian public from availing themselves of this instrument of enlightenment. Correct understanding of a people has a humanizing effect and I would be in favour of Indians being freely educated in this respect (ICC 1928a III: 463).

The ICC interviewed the legendary Punjabi nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai not long before his death at the hands of the colonial police in 1928. Although his attitude towards the cinema was, in common with much of the nationalist leadership, generally rather dismissive, he nevertheless found in it a principle of education-by-inoculation: "I don't want the youth of this country to be brought up in a nursery. They should know all these things, because then they will be better able to resist those things when they go out. They should see all those things here and they will be able to understand better all the points of modern life" (ICC 1928a II: 201).

In some respects, then, the discourse on the cinema resembled a debate on a particularly volatile *pharmakon*, a drug that, depending on the constitution of the patient, might either heal or kill.<sup>12</sup> The magic formula would be a specific conjuncture of culture, education, and spectatorial attitude – a conjuncture that would allow the cinema’s indubitable powers not exactly to be resisted, but rather most effectively to be harnessed for the production of social value. In relation to the cinema, then, a Western-style education was conceived at once as a kind of shell that would protect its beneficiary from the raw force of sensory stimulus and as a kind of prism through which this onslaught could be refracted and perhaps sublimated into something resembling a more sober aesthetic judgment. This distinction between, as it were, the raw and the cooked spectator also carried an implied contrast between affect-intensive provinciality and detached universalizing judgment.

On the one hand, Indian audiences – particularly the uneducated – were thought to respond to themes and content that was substantively familiar to them. Conversely, concerns or settings far divorced from their experience were liable to be dismissed as irrelevant. On the other hand, a Western-style education would liberate filmgoers from a dependence on such correspondences, and allow them to ascend to a more properly ‘aesthetic’ engagement with films. Education, in other words, represented the passage from the particular to the universal. The distinction upon which this ideal was based was evident even in the relatively casual comments of the likes of Mr. Ardeshir Bilimoria, the Director of the Bombay Circle of the then all but all-powerful Madan Theatres company. Bilimoria states that Indian educated audiences appreciated Western films because of their superior production values. But uneducated audiences liked the (technically inferior) Indian films because they could relate to them better. In

Rangachariar's summation of the position: "they want to see their own class of society. That is what it comes to" (ICC 1928a I: 328).

Then as now, we confront the irony that precisely the greatest colonial mimic men – the Westernized professional classes – were the ones who professed themselves entirely immune to the mimetic seductions of the cinema. The ICC's more elite Indian informants often tended to voice sentiments like those of a graduate of Lucknow University who insisted that he and his friends could attend the cinema without fear of corruption or contagion because "we can control. We are educated. We can control ourselves more than ignorant people" (ICC 1928a II: 478). And in terms that might have caused Wilhelm Reich to raise an ironic eyebrow, Mr. Villiers of the European Association noted that uneducated audiences were more excitable since they lacked the benefit of "the armour which knowledge and true perspective gives" (ICC 1928a II: 953).<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Indian nationalists of a more culturalist-populist bent tended to make the opposite claim: namely, that it was precisely the deracinated middle-class *babus* who had lost their souls to modern distractions like the cinema. The unlettered salt of the earth, on the other hand, firmly grounded in their lifeworlds, might have limited uses for such urban fripperies. But insofar as the medium might be dangerous, precisely their 'healthy' grounding in local life would protect them from it. As Lala Lajpat Rai put it: "I am very strongly of opinion [sic] that the rural people are much more moral to resist any demoralizing influences than the townspeople and I think the Punjab peasantry is such a sturdy peasantry that a few films would not have any demoralizing influence on it at all" (ICC 1928a II: 205). (Indeed, there were those who claimed that the so-called 'martial races' of the North-West in fact *required* sturdier cinematic fare than their more effeminate compatriots to the South and East. Being "full of vigour," Punjabi men, for instance, were said to appreciate "strong scenes" (ICC 1928a II: 68)).

The colonial debate on the social effects of the cinema, then, involved a constitutive oscillation between two claims. On the one hand, spectators educated in the ways of the West would be well-equipped to withstand the sensory barrage of the films, indeed, perhaps so well-equipped that the cinema's unique efficacy as a communicative medium might be lost on them. On the other hand, non-Westernized Indians were thought to be at once more vulnerable – which could also be interpreted as more open – to the cinema *and* more effectively insulated from its predations by the bulwark of tradition. A (probably unsolicited) written statement from a Calcutta organization calling itself The Publicity Campaign waxed indignant along these lines: “It is an insult to the intelligence and an affront to moral instincts to be continually alleging that Indians could see nothing but evil in a pair of dainty, tripping ankles and nothing but devil himself [sic] in arms that may be undraped. The average Indian is neither prurient in mind nor putrid in thought. The Savitris and Sitas of old still inspire his thoughts and ideas” (ICC 1928a IV: 149).

Note how the debate on the cinema swings, in a matter of seconds, from a concern with the enlightening or demoralizing *force* of its images to a question of audience *comprehension*. In other words, the issue of what the cinema might *do* to its audiences bore an ambiguous relation to the issue of whether or not they *understood* it. One variant of this problem was the recurrent complaint that the cinema misled naïve Indian audiences by scandalously misrepresenting European and American life. Here, the issue of verisimilitude sat awkwardly bundled with that of comprehension. During the ICC hearings, as the committee traveled around India, Rangachariar frequently grew exasperated at the complacency with which the educated would attribute gullibility to the illiterate audiences. At one point he exploded at the British supervisor of the Bombay Entertainment Duties Act: “Do you think that the Indian is so extraordinarily simple

[...] I think you rather exaggerate the importance of the uneducated classes. They are shrewd people, are they not?" (ICC 1928a I: 40). The issue of 'education' was of course even more complicated, once the debate moved away from a simplistic opposition between the cosmopolitan educated and the provincial uneducated. As N C Ghose, a Calcutta lawyer, demanded rhetorically: "The first thing I would like to know is, what do you mean by 'uneducated' people[?] Take the lascars or people who are employed aboard a ship and who have been to England and other places. They certainly know much more than some of us who have been to England and lived in the country. What are you going to teach them? They know more of some phases of Western life than I do" (ICC 1928a II: 916). Of course, the unstated underlying implication was that whatever Indian ship-hands might know of Western life was unlikely to find favour with any officially-sanctioned view of Europe.

In fact, as the ICC traveled around India, its conversations manifest a mounting suspicion that the entire alarmist colonial discourse on the cinema suffered from a basic logical contradiction. It was this: the types of audiences who were supposed to be particularly vulnerable to the cinema (in shorthand, the 'uneducated') were apparently not capable of understanding the kinds of films that were thought to be most potentially demoralizing (typically, social dramas with intimate or eroticized content). ICC and Bombay Censor Board member A M Green neatly summarized the objection: "If the illiterate do not understand it and the literate do not mind it or are not affected by it, there does not seem to be very much reason to object to it?" (ICC 1928a II: 273).

The members of the ICC were soon confronting their more alarmist informants with the argument that a so-called 'sex film' whose content was not understood – even if, against all odds, the 'man in the street' decided to patronize a cinema showing such a film – could not possibly

have damaging effects. To this, Mr. Healy, the Commissioner of Police in Bombay retorted that while the uneducated might have trouble following the plots, “at the same time they see what is going on” (ICC 1928a I: 77).<sup>14</sup>

But there was still another variation on the theme, namely the one that claimed that it was precisely ignorance or a lack of comprehension that was going to be socially productive. Particularly beloved of educationalists and propagandists, this perspective shared something with the Brechtian notion of an estrangement-effect, whereby insight arrives through a sudden and shocking reorientation of familiar assumptions. Sometimes the estrangement might be unintentional but nevertheless productive. One J D Khandhadia (whose occupation is, unusually, not listed in the transcripts) asserted that the majority of Indian audiences were, indeed, unlikely to understand Western films but that this was, in world-historical terms, a good thing: “Strife is the essence of evolution. Without wars there can be no world and without misunderstandings, misrepresentations, there can be no wars. It can never be helped” (ICC 1928a I: 554).

## **Conclusion**

In the longer work of which this paper is a part I develop many of the connections and questions that I have only been able to touch upon here: the historical and institutional foundations of film censorship in India, and the troubled relation between its precepts and its practice; the relation of the cinema to other forms of entertainment and publicity of the period; the question of the ‘verisimilitude’ of the cinema and its vexed relation to the problem of dramatic misrepresentation, as well as the complex connections that were argued between misrepresentation and demoralizing effects. I deal with the shifting constellations of class, caste,

religion, and age that were empirically documented among cinema audiences but also mobilized as explanatory counters in the attempt to account for this peculiar media apparatus.

What I have attempted to present here is, in a sense, what I take to be the ‘core’ of the matter, that part of the debate in 1920s India which gets to what one might call the tension between an ontology and an epistemology of the cinema. When the debate dealt with cinema images, the ontological question had to do with the *force* or *potentialities* of these images, and the epistemological problem was one of these images’ verisimilitude, in other words their relation to something called ‘real life.’ When the debate focused on audiences, its ontological side obsessed over the sensory agitation that the cinema might provoke in audiences and its epistemological side had to do with audiences’ capacity to comprehend what they were seeing. These concerns about image and audience were, of course, inseparable from the larger question of how to *regulate* the cinema in India. In this way, the entire debate is really an attempt to fix, to pin down the novel processes of social mediation that the cinema enabled. In part, of course, this pinning down was improvised as a response to unforeseen public cultural challenges. But it also quite obviously drew on models and metaphors some of which were well-established clichés of the imperial project, and some of which – particularly those quasi-electrical figurings of the shock of the image – were current in contemporary European concerns about the relationship between industrial modernity, crowds, and the mass society.

It seems to me that the experience of Hollywood near-hegemony in British India during these years constituted both a kind of melancholy fulfillment and an uneasy augury. A melancholy fulfillment in the sense that the encounter with these movies in several ways laid bare the contradictions and tensions upon which colonial cultural politics were based. An uneasy augury in that this challenge to the colonial imaginary pointed forward to the norms and forms of

the American Century. Not least among these was the equation of both progress and happiness with a highly eroticized sensory engagement with commercial mass mediated images.

This is not a one-way street, and my interest in the contradictions and tensions of the 1920s is not merely – or even primarily – antiquarian. Rather it seems to me that these contradictions and tensions, repressed by the formulas of the American Century which – in good Hegelian fashion – appeared to supersede and transcend them, return strengthened today the more this arrogant American successor to the European imperial project drives itself towards caricature.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> The proceedings and Report of the ICC are themselves an extraordinary resource, upon which I have drawn heavily in the composition of this essay: thousands of pages of interview transcripts, questionnaires and miscellany. The ICC was publicly announced in October 1927, and conducted its inquiry during several months in late 1927 and early 1928. It was chaired by a former Madras High Court Judge, T Rangachariar, and further comprised of Sir Ebrahim Haroon Jaffer (Kt), Colonel J D Crawford (DSO, MC, MLA), K C Neogy (MLA and Vakil of the Calcutta High Court), A M Green (Collector of Customs and Member of the Bombay Board of Film Censors), J

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Coatman (MLA and Director of Public Information) and, as Secretary, G G Hooper (MC, ICS).

In its scope, the Committee was in many ways quite remarkable: in order to examine 353 witnesses across the length and breadth of British India, the Committee traveled some 9,400 miles. It sent out 4,325 copies of its questionnaire and received 320 replies. Its members visited 45 cinemas, saw 57 features, and inspected 13 producing studios. In 1927, the ICC cost the colonial administration around Rs 200,000.

<sup>2</sup> The remaining 20 per cent was made up of the declining European and the surging Indian cinemas. By the middle of the 1930s, the ratio of domestic to foreign films screened in India had already approached 50/50. Today, of course, India is one of the few film markets in which domestic product remains dominant.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, to buttress this claim, Spofford appealed to the supposed cultural affinity between the United States and Britain:

We must not forget that a very large percentage of Americans are Anglo-Saxons comparatively recently transplanted. It is difficult to cut them off and make a separate race of crude people out of them. Even 300 years is not enough to clear racial traditions and folkways out of a man's unconsciousness and consciously there is not an American family of educated or semi-educated classes which does not bear in mind knowledge of its particular European descent, near or distant. America is Anglo-Saxon by tradition, custom, speech and law. American children are brought up on English classics, English fairy tales, English myths. It was America that discovered such British writers as Meredith, Conrad, Wells, Galsworthy and to a great extent Bernard Shaw (ICC 1928a IV: 298).

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<sup>4</sup> Letter to the editor, *Bombay Chronicle* January 31, 1925. Contained in India Office Library [IOL], L/P&J/6/1747 (2601/21)

<sup>5</sup> This particular intervention by Constance Bromley appeared, as Larkin notes, in a special *Times* supplement devoted to the cinema. Bromley's hand in raising the stakes of the moral panic of the 1920s is invariably noted by students of the period – hers is the one voice guaranteed to appear in any article on the topic. More interestingly, her screeds were also among the principal exhibits for the prosecution during the ICC's deliberations.

<sup>6</sup> IOL, L/P&J/6/1882/2695.

<sup>7</sup> In the silent era, and particularly in the theatres catering to a more 'vernacular' public, it was common for literate audience members to read out intertitles to their illiterate neighbours, thus creating a constant "confused murmur" (ICC 1928b: 41) in the halls. On other occasions, the cinemas would actually employ announcers to read out the titles, sometimes simultaneously in several languages, and sometimes, apparently, providing a dialogue 'track' of their own devising to accompany the images.

<sup>8</sup> The article appeared in the April 21, 1926 issue of the *Times of India*. Maharashtra State Archive [MSA] Home Dept (Poll) 1925: 194.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'sex film' did not, of course, refer to what even by the standards of the 1920s would have been recognized as pornographic films. When asked by the ICC what the term might mean, Bombay exhibitor R N Bharucha responds: "I do not know whether I shall be able to evolve a definition offhand but I will put it this way – any film which has for its main theme the relations of the sexes" (ICC I: 115). S A Alley, a cinema manager in Calcutta is rather more specific, suggesting that 'sex films' are films "[w]here there are passionate love-making scenes, kissing – not the ordinary kissing, but kissing passionately, all over the body" (ICC II: 822).

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The ICC proceedings do contain a handful of scattered references to pornographic movies. Mr. Watkins of the Bombay Film Censor Board notes that “of course we have from time to time obtained obscene films, usually toy size, bits of films, and I can remember now a little toy cinema which worked quite well” (ICC I: 104). The oral evidence given by K Dwarkadas in camera suggests that there was, at the time, a clandestine circulation of European as well as Indian pornographic films. The Bombay suburb of Santa Cruz is specified as a production location, and Dwarkadas suggests that European films may have reached India through a form of diplomatic immunity: “They found their way, I was told, through some Maharajah or Rajah” (ICC V: 7). Rangachariar admits to some direct experience, but then only of a fragmentary nature: “I did see a bit of a film like that on the Bombay side which was destroyed for fear of the police and they showed me a small portion” (ICC III: 117).

<sup>10</sup> One place where a lament over the crudeness of mass man in the West comes together with an explicit appeal to prevent the cinema from achieving the same thing in the colonies is in the travel writings of Aldous Huxley, quoted and discussed in Larkin (nd).

<sup>11</sup> Moore, again, notes that Vachel Lindsay in one of the very earliest serious works on the cinema, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915), expressed precisely this apprehension: that “America, like cinema itself, was [...] both primitive and advanced” (quoted in Moore 2000: 54).

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Pinney has developed a related argument around photography in colonial India. I am grateful to him for illuminating conversation on this topic.

<sup>13</sup> Moral vulnerability to the cinema was, typically, someone else’s problem. I did find one instance, however, in the ICC transcripts of a respondent who directly acknowledged the cinema’s demoralizing effect on himself. This was B Das, a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Delhi who couched his comment in a theory of cultural difference:

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These Western sex films and emotional films in India have that [pernicious] effect. They do not suit our national characteristics. [...] You know the Indian social life is quite different from the Western social life. Naturally when I saw these emotional films, there was a mental and moral fall in me, even in my own estimation. I felt a bit impulsive and emotional. What is natural to the West is not natural to the East (ICC 1928a III: 978, 981).

<sup>14</sup> The question of audience comprehension was also debated between representatives of the cinema business, where obviously it was thought to have a direct bearing on financial prospects. So, for instance, R N Bharucha, a Bombay exhibitor-entrepreneur, argued that Western films involving “sex topics” were the preserve of the educated. Note the direct connection that Bharucha draws between popular entertainment, uneducated audiences, and the affective density of religious practice.

My experience is if you pay a millhand a ten rupee note and give him a complimentary ticket into the bargain to go to the [upscale] Excelsior, the chances are he will run away because he would prefer any day to go to one of his own shows at Parel which are run by Mr. Engineer and wholly devoted to the labouring classes. They will flock around there and they will go with the same enthusiasm as if they were going to their temple (ICC 1928a I: 115).

On the other side of the transnational coin was the testimony of Alexander Hague, at that time the “sole proprietor” of Pathe films in India. Invested – both materially and ideologically – in the idea that there was a vast Indian market for Western films, he suggested that the local masses’ engagement with foreign product was marked by measured but enthusiastic judgment rather than either unseemly frenzy or bored incomprehension.

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It is *not* a fact that films of Western life are unintelligible to an uneducated Indian, or are largely misunderstood by him. I would recommend the Committee go to any Picture Theatre and sit with these *uneducated* audiences in the gallery and watch them, how they appreciate the finer points of highly social Western dramas. I think the cinema-going Indians are quite intelligent people and I have seen them even 20 years ago follow a picture and applaud all good points in it. And to-day the same audience, both educated and uneducated, is even more intelligent as they show their disapproval of a bad picture in no unmistakable manner (ICC 1928a I: 509).

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