

Bhaskar Sarkar. Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition

Durham and London: Duke UP, 2009, 372 pp.

Jonathan Owens

If the end of the Venice Biennale comes about from an exhaustion of its own aspirations, it is also because the impetus for its existence, art tourism and a predilection to “discover,” like Columbus, new worlds and new artists has outrun its usefulness. World art tourism is more available and more adequately attempted elsewhere. Contemporary art as we know it, colonizes more and more of the globe. It’s no wonder that the term “global” in art began to be used around the same time as the term globalization in finance and the birth of many of the new biennials in the early-to-mid nineties. Colonizing the contemporary as “the Same” has been expanding for twenty years and now the showcasing of sameness and difference is done better at the regional level, for reasons of self-discovery or otherwise. This is the nature of the exhibition form known as the biennial. For all the texts criticizing Venice, few have taken a look at the biennial and its replication as useful at times and in certain contexts, and vastly inadequate at others.

NOTE

1 As the press release states, Bourriaud’s Triennial “argues that the historical period defined by post-modernism is coming to an end, and a new art form for the twenty-first century is emerging....” He explains that “while the [1970s] economy was severing its ties with concrete geography, culture was becoming divorced from history as a coherent scenario. Postmodernism was the story of this disconnection, leading to a reified conception of ‘origins.’ What I call ‘altermodern’ is the narrative of our reconnection with both, through a new set of parameters linked to globalization: instantaneity, availability, displacements ...” (Bourriaud 2009). That historicism is part and parcel of Modernity and what we call Post-modernism is meant to be outside historical periodization in the first place is lost in this type of brand-consolidating statement.

REFERENCES

Nicholas Bourriaud, “Tate Triennial 2009,” interview with Tom Morton, *Freize*, #120 (January/February 2009), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/tate_triennial_2009/. Tate Modern, press release for “Altermodern: Tate Triennial 2009” (January 2, 2009), <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/pressreleases/2009/17523.htm>.

On August 14th, 1947 a sovereign Pakistan was created, and the following day saw the creation of a sovereign India, and event known as Partition. Bhaskar Sarkar’s *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* adds a much-needed addition to the quickly expanding catalogue of scholarly work on Indian cinema. In his book, Sarkar considers the effects of Partition on the world’s largest film industry through an examination of Bollywood, Bengali, and other regional cinemas, as well as Indian television. Sarkar’s analysis both addresses and moves past an understanding of Indian film merely as part of India’s nation-building project. Rather, Sarkar suggests that the relationship between Indian cinema and nation has, since Indian sovereignty, been fluid and complex. In his introduction, he cautions that rather than view Partition as India’s originary trauma, one which has caused all of India’s present “woes,” Partition should be understood within a matrix of discourse that continues to change. For instance, in the book’s last chapter, Sarkar asserts that in recent years Partition has been consciously mobilized by contemporary cultural and political trends. This mobilization demonstrates the self-awareness that, according to Sarkar, the media has of its own role in memory and archiving history.

The book’s seven chapters and coda are divided into two sections. The first section of the book focuses on the relative silence of representation of Partition in the thirty years immediately following the event. The second section examines how and why this silence was broken through textual analysis of specific cases of the representation of Partition within Indian film and television—what the author calls “the return of repressed.” As far as the increased rise in Partition

representation, Sarkar contends that several factors in the 1980s broke film's Partition-silence, such as the rise of *dalit* (untouchable) politics and religious militancy. Chapter Six of the book focuses on the television mini-series *Tamas* (*Darkness*), originally aired on the state-owned network Doordarshan. The series depicts the violent effects of Partition through the experiences of Nathu, a lower-caste worker, and his family. In his analysis of the series, Sarkar suggests that the narrative of *Tamas* not only absolves the average Indian citizen of the violence and trauma brought by Partition, it places the blame on India's national leaders and colonial forces and policies.

Whilst examining the period immediately following Partition, Sarkar asks the question, "if contemporary films did not represent what was clearly the most momentous event in modern South Asian history, what were they doing instead?" (49). Sarkar's question points to his unique methodology—his analysis considers both what stories are being told and which stories remain untold. In doing so, he argues that cinematic discourse is constituted by both its "expressions and silences." For example, in the Bengali films of the 1940s and 1950s, Sarkar argues that narrative preoccupation with poverty and homelessness is the trace of Partition mourning. Later, the author makes a convincing case of these traces of mourning, looking at refugees both as spectator and film subject. Sarkar contends that India's mourning is as much about what has happened in the decades since Partition as fantasies of what could have happened. In his words, he is interested in "a kind of mourning work that helps us dream about futures and communities" (page 43).

Like most of the books published on Indian cinema in the past few years Sarkar cannot escape situating his analysis within globalization discourse. Yet, even while engaging with the effects of globalization on Indian cinema, he never loses sight of Partition. Rather, when he engages with globalization and its effects on Indian cinema and television, it is to further an understanding of the changing and multiple effects of, and reactions to, Partition.

Also, similar to many of the books now being published on Indian cinema, the book's greatest strength may be its specificity. This is a comment not just on the book itself, but also on the landscape of Indian film studies. The field has grown beyond its earlier, often pejorative, writing, and now beyond the taxonomies and surveys that were published in the 1990s. Instead, books such as Bhaskar Sarkar's have a narrow focus, in this case Partition, and an important one at that.

FILM

Invisible City

Dir. Hubert Davis

NFB, 2009.

Regent Park Film Festival

Nelson Mandela Public School. 7 November 2009.

May Chew

Hubert Davis's *Invisible City*, screened at Toronto's Regent Park Film Festival (RPF) this fall, opens with a crucial image; it is a bird's eye view, which situates in its foreground a handful of ramshackle, tired apartment buildings that comprise the heart of Regent Park, Canada's largest and oldest housing community. Somewhere towards the back, the hazy line of Toronto looms silently. As this image and the rest of Davis's documentary goes on to suggest, there is a hard, yet unspoken line drawn between these two planes, a line that characterizes Toronto's resolute blindness towards its West end neighbourhood. It is precisely this "invisibility" that the film then attempts to uncloak, by actively foregrounding Regent Park residents and giving them a platform—albeit never a wholly unencumbered one—from which to speak.

The film follows intermittently two Regent Park residents, Mikey and Kendall, through three years of