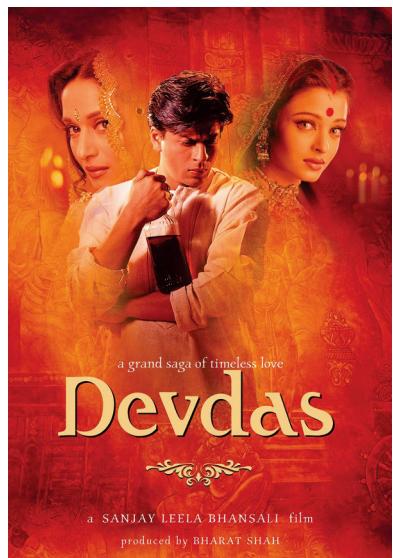


Devdas (देवदास, 2002)

Vijay Mishra

dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali; prod. Bharat Shah; screenplay Prakash Kapadia, Sanjay Leela Bhansali; photography Binod Pradhan; music Ismail Darbar. 35mm, color, 184 mins. Mega Bollywood, distrib. Eros International and Focus International.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* is the third major Hindi remake of Pramathesh Chandra Barua's 1935 Bengali film version of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's 1917 novel of the same name. Within a matter of months, Barua's *Devdas* was filmed in Hindi with the legendary singer-actor K. L. Saigal taking over Barua's own role as Devdas. While close replication of the novel has been rare, the novel's central theme—the Indian hero as the Werther figure, sentimental and always in a state of despondency and melancholia—has become the cornerstone of Indian films made in Hindi. However, the theme has required a structural correlative in the form of a local, nativist aesthetics of emotional response. Hindu culture already had a theory of reception that stretches back to the ancient Sanskrit manual of dramaturgy, Bharatmuni's *Natyashastra* (2nd century B.C.E). The manual prioritized the aesthetic response of pity, or *karuna*, as the most emotionally powerful and made it the dominant *rasa* of Indian reception theory. And it is here that, in the case of Indian cinema, the received English-colonial melodramatic mode enters the Indian aesthetic imaginary. Indeed, the success of Chattopadhyay's own novel was due to the way the writer had adapted the English and European melodrama of the »man of feeling,« so popular in colonial Bengal. The melodramatic mode, selectively invested with elements of Parsi theater and the folk dance tradition of Nautanki, within an Indian theory of artistic reception, became the dominant mode of narrative expression in Bollywood. In this mode, the man of feeling will not be able to translate love into action. Thus, in the Bhansali remake of the film, when Devdas' beloved Paro, in a red sari and black shawl, seeks him out in his own bedroom in the quiet of the night, he can only respond passively. His disconnected words alternate between what his parents would say and his own unease when faced with the strength



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of this forthright woman. But this is the melodramatic sublime, the Law of Reason for the moment in disarray, the specters of a castrating tyrannical father and the Oedipally inclined mother always lurking in the background. Failure to love does not lead to its transfer to another, nor to an alternative act as a compensation. Rather, it leads to an all-consuming death wish, as the hero is convinced that in this act of dissolution, of self-sacrifice, the world would itself come to an end. *Devdas* seeks out death, and after what can only be called a melancholic journey of life, finds it at the doorstep of Paro, the melodramatic hero fulfilling a promise made: »Before I die, I will see you.« But, of course, within the feudal laws of the regulative female body, she cannot step outside: The doors close and a final act of defiance and love is denied. This is the kind of mourning and self-denial that marks the Bollywood melodramatic film. Whereas elsewhere the form no longer excites, in Bollywood it thrives.

It is *Devdas*' preeminence as Indian cinema's definitive sentimental and melodramatic text that led Sanjay Leela Bhansali, some forty-seven years after the last version, to recreate *Devdas* as a pure »Bollywood« film. As argued by India's foremost film theorist, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, »Bollywood« is a post-celluloid form of Hindi/Bombay Cinema. It is a style, a simulacral digitally remastered cinema, that recreates the older filmic realism through »a reasonably specific narrative and mode of representation« and »a more diffuse cultural conglomeration« (Rajadhyaksha 23, 20). As a post-celluloid phenomenon, »Bollywood« may even be given a date (say, post-1990). Its productive expression, if not its genesis, may be traced back to Bhansali's film preceding *Devdas*—*Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (*Straight from the Heart*, 1999). Here, digitally created *mise-en-scènes* celebrated a »Bollywood« that would also »speak« to its burgeoning spectatorship in the Indian diaspora in the West. In a radical shift from the received narrative, the establishing shots of Bhansali's film would show the return of *Devdas* not from Calcutta but from England, as a thoroughly colonial lawyer. Fidelity to the original in any recreation will now not be so much to historical truth or realist representation but rather to Indian cinema's own postmodern, simulacral modes of representation and with an eye toward consumption by the global diaspora. In this genre, matters must be spelled out. Feelings are no longer restricted to figurative language in dialogue and song—they must be demonstrated, too, through a visual syntax. Thus, whereas pre-Bollywood Hindi cinema had insinuated the central motif of impossible love through metaphor, Bhansali's Paro must hold on to an everlasting flame, the seafarer's lamp suffused with the magic of Aladdin. And this flame must die upon *Devdas'* death, in another instance of symbolic correlation. Visual splendor for Bhansali overtakes a poetics of suggestiveness—the heart of Indian aesthetics of response—as this splendor transforms the affective nature of aesthetic response into an invitation to voyeuristic specularity, and possibly identification.

On Paro's body, to adapt a line from Peter Brooks' theorizing of the melodramatic imagination, *Devdas'* »desire inscribed an impossible history« (xii). *Devdas* would never understand his role in creating a woman's hysterical body and would turn instead to a melancholic imagination—but not before he wounds her with her own necklace on her wedding day. For the Indian spectator, the symbolism is stark and its effect immediate. This act of phallic wounding symbolically transforms Paro into *Devdas'* bride, as he uses the blood on the wound to enact the Hindu marriage ritual by placing it in the parting of her hair. Such melodramatic excess, symbolically enacted, is common in Bhansali's treatment of the story. The enactment may be located in the

Bollywood film as a visual spectacle. Two dominant color palettes would be used to reinforce this: red and blue. The red palette would frame dramatic encounters principally between women—between two mothers (Paro's and Devdas', both framing Devdas in an Oedipal discourse of incestuous desire), and between two women in love with Devdas (Paro and Chandramukhi, both in a barely suppressed homoerotic desire)—but also between Devdas and Paro, when the latter brings a red jumper to him which she is knitting. The red would also capture—through the use of chandeliers, candles, and clay lamps—the world of the courtesan Chandramukhi, described as the city's »pre-eminent courtesan.« Elsewhere, the visual glamor of this palette would mark dance item numbers, a signature mode in all of Bhansali's melodramas, including his melodramatic epics, *Ram-Leela* (2013), *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), and *Padmaavat* (2018).

The blue palette, with its soft focus on the bodies of lovers, often as intercut shots juxtaposing the splendor of the scenes in red palette—such as Paro's mother's Radha Krishna dance, where the crowd also swings in devotional harmony—drags the spectator into the world of illicit love, in which he, assuming spectatorial desire is male, slyly participates. What was suggestively present in the earlier versions of the Devdas tale—that Paro could not be the object of male desire and sexual gaze because her presence »desexualized« Devdas—is now offered, to borrow these affects from Laura Mulvey's work, both as a site of scopophilic eroticism (voyeurism) and as libidinous ego (narcissism). Colors would radiate in all directions—and the homage in Bhansali's *Devdas* is not to a theme that has held the narrative of Indian cinema together for almost a century, but to the hold that Bollywood, as visual splendor, now has on the spectator. This principle would resurface in Bhansali's finest film, *Saawariya* (*The Beloved*, 2007), based on Luchino Visconti's *Le Notti Bianche* (*White Nights*, 1957), itself sourced from a Dostoevsky short story.

Saawariya works as an aesthetic unity because of its homage to the Visconti intertext as art qua art. In Bhansali's *Devdas*, the ideological intrudes, reminding spectators of Bollywood's role as self-declared »national cinema.« But this is melodrama and the ideological is delivered in absolute terms without any self-critique: good versus evil, selfishness versus sacrifice, heroes versus villains (where villains are presented to be »hissed«). These are then dramatically shown through anecdotal incidents whose relationship to the central narrative is often incidental. Thus, the courtesan is brought close to the feudal wife as the provider of an essential item in a religious oblation. The courtesan is empowered as a woman in control of her destiny in a dramatic encounter with one of her erstwhile suitors. Paro herself is denied both love and motherhood by her husband because he cannot forget his former wife nor forgive Paro for her devotion to Devdas' memory. Paro's isolation is symptomatic of the plight of Indian women generally. Further, the abuse of alcohol—Devdas dies a maudlin drunkard—and the social consequences of a caste-ridden culture that would deny love together turn the excesses of Bollywood melodrama into a morality play. These characteristics are not new, but Bhansali's Bollywood must keep them dramatically alive, even when the text on which the film is based demands a different mode of artistic expression. That Bhansali triumphed and his *Devdas* entered contemporary Indian modernity, supplanting its earlier artistically more accomplished versions (it was chosen as India's entry as the Best Foreign Language Film for the 2003 Academy Awards), confirms Bollywood's role as the cultural dominant of India, through which both a pervasive art form (melodrama) and the (absolute) values of the nation are articulated.

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