As the sun sets and night falls, a vampire rises from his crypt. Emerging from a cave deep inside the mountains, the *shaitan* (demon) is desperate to quench his thirst for human blood. His eyes are red, and his fangs are sharp. The vampire looks out over the dark valley that lies before him and takes flight into the night (see figure 1). So begins the Ramsay Brothers’ *Bandh Darwaza* (Closed door, 1990), one entry in a cycle of Hindi-language horror films made in India between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. During this time, a few filmmakers shot dozens of horror films in the decrepit colonial mansions and empty industrial mills of Bombay and in the forested hills and seaside palaces surrounding the city. Foremost among these filmmakers were the seven siblings known as the Ramsay Brothers, who made “India’s First Horror Film,” *Darwaza* (Door, 1978). Working with enthusiastic actors and skilled technicians, the Ramsay Brothers and their contemporaries produced a wave of horror movies about soul-sucking witches, knife-wielding psychopaths, and dark-caped vampires. Thrilled audiences turned some of these films into box office hits, but critics routinely disparaged the films as “second-hand imitations of third-grade foreign horror movies,” while the Indian government censored them for their graphic violence.¹ As the Bombay film business transformed into Bollywood, a global
culture industry known for lavish melodramas, the horror wave dissipated, and the Ramsay Brothers disbanded.

The films they made have not been forgotten. A modest hit when it first opened in a few theaters in Bombay, *Bandh Darwaza* has since then traveled far beyond the city (renamed Mumbai in 1995) via successive releases on videotape, disc, and online. In 2023 a new transfer of the film from the original negative was released on Blu-ray by the cult film label Mondo Macabro, while on YouTube, different versions of the film have collectively tallied more than one hundred million views. Meanwhile, contemporary directors who came of age watching 1980s horror films seek to evoke in their own work the atmosphere that makes them effective. Horror films often immerse us in faraway worlds and distant pasts in order to induce terror, anxiety, discomfort, disorientation, and disgust—the syndrome of responses with which the genre is identified. *Bandh Darwaza* accomplishes its aim by accumulating small details: the milky fog that envelops the mountains; the deep silence into which the vampire’s coffin creaks open; and the long, gnarled fingers of the vampire as he crawls out from inside the crypt. Such details make the nightmare feel real: like we are deep inside the dark cave, able to touch the vampire’s body and be touched by him.

Consider, however, another detail: as the vampire awakens in the murkiness of night, we are shown the territory he will hunt. Surveying what the stentorian voiceover describes as a land shrouded in the “darkness of

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*Figure 1. Vampire surveying the darkness: detail from Bandh Darwaza (1990).* 
*Source: Ramsay Pictures.*
death,” we see rolling hills, their green valleys brightly dappled in daylight (see figure 2). This daylight doesn’t destroy the vampire, though it does somewhat upset the illusion. Erupting into the nocturnal mood Bandh Darwaza conjures from so many textured images and sounds, the daylight exemplifies a second class of details frequently encountered in Bombay horror: failures. A film may suddenly lose resolution or fill with noise; feature a continuity error or celluloid damage; or betray a botched special effect, incomplete makeup, or lame performance. Such failures may be fleetingly visible, but they encourage us to see things a bit differently.

It is a convention of Bombay horror that all strange visions must first be dismissed. Because what they see—a flitting shadow, a reflection in a mirror, a face in the window—pressures the limits of temporal and spatial presence, the protagonists of Bombay horror must weather a duration of uncertainty in which friends, family, and the film’s viewers wonder if they are in the grip of a vehem (superstition), sapna (dream), or paagalpan (madness). But they persist, trying to close the gap between what they have seen and what they can say about it (see figure 3). For the heroines of horror films, as Bliss Cua Lim has written, space turns out to be a “spectral surface of only limited opacity, behind which other times and places are poignantly apparent.” Slowly, seeing gives way to doing: examining old photographs, asking questions, and undertaking journeys. When they return to the site of haunting with aging witnesses, yellowing newspapers, or just a sledgehammer, their progressive investment in the past pays off with a public
Figure 3. Seeing with the visionary heroines of Bombay horror (Dahshat, 1981).
Source: Author’s collection.
exhumation of something buried: hidden acts of violation, murder, and dismemberment so traumatic they spawned ghosts to possess the present.

This book follows the intrepid ghost hunters and paranormal mediums of horror films. Ghost stories have something to teach historians: to “see the past in the shape of something odd” and “stake their historical claims on it.” The failures of Bombay horror are reminders and remainders of the mundane resources from which the fantastic was secured onscreen. Seeing Things reads failures as historiographic clues—to the conditions in which the films were once made, censored, and seen—and as aesthetic cues—in my experience of horrific story worlds. What I call the spectral materialities of Bombay horror are both sensuous and significant, because they mark the spectral presence of cinema’s material pasts at the scene of horror. Like the phantom in Jadu Tona (Black magic, Ravikant Nagaich, 1978) or the living corpse in Khooni Panja (Killer claw, Vinod Talwar, 1991), the spectral materialities of Bombay horror too exist at the edges of ordinary perception and encourage imaginative explanations of their origins. The ghosts I hunt in this book thrive in the corners of frames and lurk between reels: a man is seen crouched above a monster’s lair, positioning a spotlight, or an inexplicable jump cut suddenly reorders the lair’s layout. Seeing things in scenes of horror reveals that creators of the films reused latex masks and props till they fell apart, that state censors destroyed some images entirely while mangling others visibly, and that viewers handled the films as junk prints and worn-out videocassette copies. In this way, Seeing Things tracks the felt physicality that informs the genre’s globally familiar conventions and gives visceral force to our experience of horror’s possessed bodies, gothic landscapes, and graphic violence. Combining close analysis with extensive archival research and original interviews, the book reveals the material histories encrypted within the genre’s spectral visions. Following Priya Jaikumar’s suggestion to read visual space as sites “where histories reside,” Seeing Things brings into view the tactile practices of production, regulation, and circulation that have shaped the world’s largest film culture.

BOMBAY HORROR

By 1980, India was the largest producer of films in the world: approximately 1,000 films were released that year alone, among them 150 from
the Bombay film industry. In a “vast country like India, where 80 percent of the population cannot even read,” declared a government report, cinema exerts an “exceptionally powerful hold on the Indian public.” Yet the report noted that cinema “continues to be treated almost as a subculture” by members of the cultural intelligentsia, critics in the quality press, and the state. The report was prepared in the shadow of Sholay (Embers, Ramesh Sippy, 1975), an exhilarating, big-budget revenge picture. By the time the report was published in 1980, the film had become the biggest hit in the history of Indian cinema. Audiences returned for multiple viewings, memorizing lines of dialogue, the lyrics of its songs, and body language of its stars. In the wake of Sholay’s success, the production of “masala” genre films exploded. Aiming to replicate Sholay’s canny combination of a familiar menu—action, romance, comedy, and song and dance—with conventions of the Western, these producers found success repackaging other globally circulating genres in films like the spy thriller Agent Vinod (Deepak Bahry, 1977), the dance film Disco Dancer (Babbar Subhash, 1982), and the gangster film Parinda (Bird, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1989).

Advertised as “India’s First Horror Film” (see figure 4), Darwaza (Door, Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1978) begins when a cruel thakur (baron) murders a peasant devotee of the goddess Kali for fomenting resistance to his exploitative regime. Setting the young man on fire before the drought-stricken farmers whose crop he commands, the baron’s cruelty in turn draws a curse from the martyr’s mother: “Oh, Thakur, the way you’ve set my child on fire, I wish extinction on your family!” The curse cast by a powerless woman haunts the baron’s son. As he comes of age, the son has nightmares of a woman’s wail, a cobwebbed cave, of lightning striking in the dead of night—all beckoning him to return to the maw of ancestral violence and open the haveli (mansion) door behind which a cursed monster lurks.

That ancestral haveli supplies Darwaza’s opening shot: an establishing view of the mansion at night. The shot draws me in to the here and now of its storyworld (this house, this night) but it is also an opening into other times. In films such as Bombay Talkies’s Mahal (Palace, Kamal Amrohi, 1949), Madhumati (Bimal Roy, 1958), Kohraa (Fog, Biren Nag, 1964), and Woh Kaun Thi? (Who was she?, Raj Khosla, 1964), protagonists and viewers were likewise lured to rural mansions. Through sensuous sound
and gorgeous black-and-white photography, such films exercised the “mesmeric lure of the ghost story.” Pulled into the gravitational orbit of a lush and decrepit haveli, the viewer accompanied the hero on a journey back to a placeless, timeless world of curses, cobwebs, shadows, and siren songs. *Darwaza*’s establishing shot is thus a generic image of the past, an unremembered memory of gothic thrillers made during the “golden age” of Bombay cinema. While in the older films monsters and ghosts were usually revealed as actors, plots and illusions staged to avenge crimes of violence and greed committed in the haveli long ago, similar misdeeds unleash a very real monster in *Darwaza*. With an opening shot that sweeps us (back) into the haveli, this time in color—where a blood-red chandelier sways above and a claw-footed monster roams below—*Darwaza* is better understood as the first horror film for a new generation of moviegoers.

*Darwaza* was quickly followed by *Haiwan* (Monster, Ram Rano, 1978), *Jadu Tona, Aur Kaun* (Who else?, 1979, Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay; see figure 5), and *Jaani Dushman* (Mortal enemy, Rajkumar Kohli, 1979). The Ramsay Brothers gained early control of the theatrical market with loyal distributors and exhibitors, but viable competitors arose after their box office smash *Purana Mandir* (Old temple, Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1984): director-producers like Mohan Bhakri, starting with *Cheekh* (Scream, 1985), and Vinod Talwar, with *Raat Ke Andhere Mein* (In the dark of the night, 1987). An issue of the industry periodical *Trade Guide* from 1985 indicates the frenzied rate of production: full-page advertisements for *Saamri*, a sequel to *Purana Mandir* (“From the Only Genuine Makers of Horror Films in India”) jostle with notices for Joginder Shelly’s *Pyasa Shaitan* (Thirsty demon) and Mohan Bhakri’s *Cheekh* and *Khooni Mahal* (Bloody palace)—“Our Next Venture Now on the Sets,” declares an advertisement for the latter film (see figure 6). Despite the intensity of audience interest, the longevity of the genre was uncertain. Every year may have brought a film advertised as “The Final Horror,” as was the case with 1985’s *Tahkhana* (Dungeon, Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay). In a 1987 article, *Filmfare* wryly commented on the “fast-multiplying clan of Ramsays,” a school of producers adept at imitating the “Ramsay Brothers’ time-worn strategy of scaring people for a fast buck.” *Saat Saal Baad* (Seven years later, S. U. Syed, 1987) was followed in 1988 by *Bees Saal Baad* (Twenty years later, Rajkumar Kohli), and in
Figure 5. Song booklet for *Aur Kaun* (1979), an early entry in the Bombay horror cycle. *Source:* National Film Archive of India, Pune.
Figure 6. “Our Next Venture Now on the Sets”: horror booms in the mid-1980s. 
1989 by *Sau Saal Baad* (Hundred years later, Mohan Bhakri). Perhaps predictably, audience appetite was depleted by film after film, and the life of the genre began to resemble a cycle that could be “financially viable for only five to ten years.” The end of Bombay horror was coming, with films like the prophetically titled *Aakhri Cheekh* (The last scream, 1991, Kiran Ramsay). Talwar and Bhakri moved out of horror films, while a few of the Ramsay Brothers parlayed their film career into a move to television. On the *Zee Horror Show* (1993–97), Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay reused many of the same props and locations first seen in their films and devised multi-episode narratives that resembled their films. Gangu Ramsay, who had served as cinematographer on *Bandh Darwaza*, took his skills outside the family studio, while Kiran Ramsay became a significant sound designer of the 1990s.

Between *Darwaza* and *Bandh Darwaza*, approximately fifty horror films were made in Bombay. These were, effectively, what the horror film was in 1980s India. The most successful of them shared thematic, stylistic, and narrative characteristics. At the source of haunting lies a decadent feudal order, at the top of which sits a thakur. The depredations of this land-owning caste are visited upon helpless peasants and young village women in the film’s prologue and reverberate down the thakur’s family line and follow it to the city. In returning to the ancestral palace, the horror hero explicitly acknowledges the sins of his father. By vanquishing whatever cave-dwelling monster or black magic the thakur’s misdeeds caused to exist, our hero also clears cobwebs and renews the feudal order. Benign yet righteously violent climaxes follow, in which a monster is fatally pierced with a holy *trishul* (trident) or a *chudail* (witch) is hanged in the village square. These conventions recur in many of the films, though there are significant variations: in the bloody slasher film *Jaani Dushman*, a werewolf kills women in a mountain valley; in *Cheekh*, a gloved serial killer attacks while heroes and heroines shimmy at the discotheque; in *Kabrastan* (Graveyard, Mohan Bhakri, 1988), a television screen and a Sony Walkman beam messages from the beyond, eventually possessing the body of their user.

The horror film’s “countless scenes of violence, cruelty and horror,” the state-run censor board once warned, “would offend the sensibilities of an average citizen.” As Bombay’s first horror films were reaching their
audiences, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting revised the censorship code for the first time in almost two decades; a new category, “scenes of horror,” moved to the proscriptive fore. Many horror films were “banned,” or refused clearance to release; others were released with disclaimers appended about the fictionality of ghosts and monsters. Along with the 1980s’ cycle of rape-revenge thrillers such as *Insaf Ka Tarazu* (The scales of justice, B. R. Chopra, 1980) and *Zakhmi Aurat* (Wounded woman, Avtar Bhogal, 1988), the horror film was one of the most surveilled genres at the Bombay office of the censor board.

The veteran film critic Khalid Mohammed decried how strictly horror films were being regulated. The censors, he wrote, “evidently do not care a whit about the new concerns or the shifting styles of international cinema. To them, horror is dirty business. And that’s it.”13 “What do they expect?” Mohammed asked exasperatedly. “A song by the lakeside or mealy-mouthed sermons in the tradition of Rajshri Pictures?”14 Like the Ramsay Brothers, Rajshri Pictures was a family-run studio that had been commissioning thrifty genre films: the spy film *Agent Vinod*, the religious devotional film *Gopal Krishna* (Vijay Sharma, 1979), and the domestic drama *Saaransh* (Gist, Mahesh Bhatt, 1984). By the end of the 1980s, however, the studio was responsible for what became the highest-grossing release of the decade: the romantic melodrama *Maine Pyar Kiya* (I have loved, 1989, Sooraj Barjatya). The film’s gargantuan success predicted an array of expensive song-and-dance spectacles centered on family, love, and marriage, such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!* (Who am I to you?, Sooraj Barjatya, 1994) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The braveheart will take the bride, Aditya Chopra, 1995). Like these films, Bombay’s horror films too featured lakeside songs and sermons, but privilege the disruptive shocks and unsettling ambience afforded by horror. In *Saat Saal Baad*, for example, the lake is where the film’s undead killer surfaces from, upturning boats and dragging victims down with him.

The final victim in *Saat Saal Baad* was played by Sharmila Tagore, now past her reign as the darling of Bombay romances of the 1960s, and almost three decades after she debuted in Satyajit Ray’s *Apur Sansar* (Apu’s World, 1959). At the peak of Bombay horror’s popularity, marquee names appeared in the films. Mithun Chakraborty starred in *Bees Saal Baad* in 1988, by which time his *Disco Dancer* had outstripped *Sholay* to become
the highest grossing Indian film of all time, setting box office records in the Soviet Union and China. But Chakraborty and Tagore were outliers in a genre that was minting its own stars. The pinup-friendly Hemant Birje, who had a buff start in *Adventures of Tarzan* (Babbar Subhash, 1985), was a principal in the Ramsays’ *Veerana* and *Tahkhana*, as well as Bhakri’s *Kabrastan* and *Sau Saal Baad*. Tina Ghai was cast in *Veerana*, *Sau Saal Baad*, and then *Khooni Murda* (killer corpse, Mohan Bhakri, 1989), in which her head is smashed into a television screen by the ghost of a serial killer. Madhu Malhotra acted in *Cheekh* and the Ramsays’ *Telephone* (1985) after she appeared in *Pyasa Shaitan*, in the opening minutes of which she is trapped in the woods and raped by the vines of a demonic tree.

These images might recall memories of other 1980s horror movies like *Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981), *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham, 1981), and *Nightmare on Elm Street: Dream Warriors* (Chuck Russell, 1987). Bombay horror had little investment in producing a folk form; instead, filmmakers deliberately alluded to other horror films from Bombay and around the world, alternately paying tribute to or subtly undermining their contemporaries and competition. *Bandh Darwaza*, for example, limns a “visual genealogy of transnationalism,” evoking vampire films shot in and around Berlin, Los Angeles, London, Rome, Lahore, and Mexico City over the decades.15 These films span the canon of horror, from foundational texts such as the German expressionist *Nosferatu* (F. W Murnau, 1922) and Hollywood studio film *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) to the British *Horror of Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958), Italian *Mask of Satan* (Mario Bava, 1960), Pakistani *Zinda Laash* (Living corpse, Khwaja Sarfraz, 1967), and Mexican *Alucarda* (Juan López Moctezuma, 1977). Writing about the “semiotic osmosis” of *Bandh Darwaza*, Usha Iyer has noted how the film blends the global trappings of the cinematic vampire with Indian cinema’s popular iconography of tantrism.16 Tulsi Ramsay himself made no secret of having watched videotape after videotape for “ideas aur gadgets” (“ideas and gadgets”), in the process ensuring that Bombay’s horror films blended repetition and variation in the way that audiences of genre films enjoy.17

Yet the charge of plagiarism aggressively stalked the films, and film critics and industry insiders have long referred to Bombay horror as “spurious desi by-products,” “second-hand imitations,” and “bad copies” of
foreign horror films. In fact, the films are reminders that the horror film was different things in different places at different times. Bombay horror generates the states of fear, anxiety, and disgust associated with horror but also induces the pathos of melodrama, the amorousness of romance, and the levity of comedy—it moves viewers through a cycle of feelings over two hours in which horror is produced by juxtaposition. *Bandh Darwaza* features a bloodthirsty vampire, but also other attractions: action, such as when the hero comes to fisticuffs with the vampire’s henchmen; song-and-dance romance, such as the number “Bheega Bheega Mausam Tadpaye”; and slapstick comedy, courtesy of the house servant, played by Johnny Lever. Such combinations could leave viewers cold or confused. A “veritable hotchpotch in search of a genre” is how a critic in the trade journal *Screen* dismissed *Purana Mandir* in 1984. But an essay published the following year in a different *Screen* might have helped the critic make sense of what they saw.

In her 1985 essay, “Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity,” in the academic journal of film studies *Screen*, Rosie Thomas focused on the flexible assemblage of masala films, which she cautioned made “Hollywood genre classification quite inappropriate to Hindi cinema.” Arguing that a carefully “ordered succession of modes of affect” constitutes masala cinema, Thomas helped lay the foundation of Indian film studies as an academic subfield. Since then, scholars seeking to understand what makes Indian popular cinema distinctive have historicized, contextualized, and theorized its “interrupted,” “omnibus,” and “disaggregated” format as a meaningful and pleasurable mélange born of South Asian performance traditions, financial speculation, and state imperatives. “Horror appeared late in the history of Indian cinema, and when it did so,” writes Sangita Gopal, “it was not as a full-blown genre but as a variation on the dominant masala format.”

As Bombay horror, Gopal concludes, horror was “incomplete,” the genre not yet having “found its true form” in Hindi cinema. That “true form,” she suggests, arrived in the 1990s with “new horror,” beginning with *Raat* (Night, Ram Gopal Varma, 1991): the performance of an international style of horror addressed to a cosmopolitan consumer class in India’s rapidly transforming cities. Ditching song-and-dance routines while adopting digital special effects, new horror films of the 1990s and afterward target
audiences in upscale multiplex theaters: ghosts haunt cellphone screens and chic apartments, surfacing “anxieties buried in the delirium of middle-class consumerism, globalization, and the new media sensorium.” The gentrification of horror continues into the contemporary era, with landmarks extending from the theatrical hit Bhoot (Ghost, Ram Gopal Varma, 2003) to Bulbbul (Songbird, Anvita Dutt, 2020), a glossy horror film produced and distributed globally by the streaming service Netflix.

In other parts of the internet, something else brews. A “wave of cinephiliac B-movie desire has erupted across social media platforms,” writes Vibhushan Subba, in which the “universe of the low-budget Bombay film runs silent, runs deep.” Viewers are discovering what Bombay cinema once was (and could still be): “avenging amazons in leopard print leopards,” “wild jungle fantasies with stuffed tigers,” “violated men in cheap Halloween costumes,” and “draculas with Styrofoam wings.” Where the films are lost, posters, song booklets, and other “scraps” of films like the sea monster movie Gogola (Balwant Dave, 1966) have become collector’s items. The fascination is shared by film scholars, who are publishing “revisionist historiographies” of Bombay cinema’s first century. Stunt films of the 1920s, 1930s magic films, 1940s adventure films, 1960s wrestling films, and 1970s devotional films—these genres, their makers, and their audiences are indications of diverse histories missed by a focus on the respectable genres of mythological, the social, or the family melodrama. The academic study of Indian popular cinema has been visibly remade by an inverted “axis of taste,” in which “cinematic value” and “scholarly value” are reciprocally related: “the lower-brow the object” from Bombay cinema’s past, the “more interesting it is as an object of study” for film scholars working across institutional and geographical locations. Horror films too help expose the hierarchies of taste, which regulate the ranks of the respectable genres of Bombay film history.

Seeing Things focuses on films that have been eclipsed in the industrial, journalistic, and scholarly focus on Bollywood—a big-budget, star-driven cinema of song-and-dance spectacle in frictionless circulation around the world. Bombay cinema of the 1980s remains, in Tejaswini Ganti’s words, “emblematic of Hindi cinema’s uncool past.” During her interviews with filmmakers in the Bombay film industry of the 1990s and after, Ganti observed the persistence of a discourse that figured the 1980s as “a
particularly dreadful period of filmmaking, in contrast with both earlier and later periods of Hindi cinema.”34 Neither like the politically incandescent hits that established Amitabh Bachchan as an “angry young man” in the 1970s nor like the flossy romantic blockbusters of the 1990s associated with Bollywood, the popular films of the 1980s were from the beginning deemed largely unworthy.35

In a booklet accompanying the state-sponsored Film Utsav of 1985, film critic Iqbal Masood lamented the state of affairs. Action films like director K. Bapaiah’s *Mawaali* (Rascal, 1983) and *Maqsad* (Aim, 1984) were differentiated from other films only in degree: they were “high kitsch,” compared to the “lower” kitsch of mythological and horror films, the “former usually on a level with the roadside stage performances during the Gana-pati festival and the latter frequently more hideous than frightening.”36 Masood’s anxiety about a new and “rampant lowbrow cinema” emerging in the wake of Bombay’s studio system was generally displaced onto the “sub-grade producers who make horror films,” and from them onto the “goo and monsters” of such films.37

The blooper that besieges the start of *Bandh Darwaza* would not have surprised most film critics. Journalistic, governmental, and industrial discourses from the 1980s link a rapid decline in film “quality” with multiple, interconnected crises in film production, censorship, and circulation. What emerges from these discourses is a view of Bombay cinema in the 1980s as an industrial, aesthetic, and even moral failure. Bombay horror was the failure within this failure, so that its moments of failure doubly metonymize the seemingly unprecedented crises of Bombay cinema during the 1980s. But the failures explored in this book are not just arbitrary imprints of a chaotic reality; they are the inscriptions—both evidence and effect—of the struggles to wrangle that reality into film. These struggles come into view via the failures of Bombay horror. By glitching the conventions of a genre, Bombay horror generated traces through which we can experience and interpret the material past at the scene of horror.38

A MATERIALIST AESTHETICS OF BOMBAY HORROR

Like nightmares, horror films bid viewers to unscramble the meaning hidden in their symbolic representations. As viewers, we understand the
spaces, bodies, and stories on-screen to be displaced versions of our reality, somehow coded into the conventions of horror. That encoding, which installs the gap between history and fantasy, between cultural past and cinematic presence, elicits reading. It calls on us to fill the gap between the bizarre worlds of the genre and the everyday world we inhabit. Accordingly, scholars of horror have understood the fearsome visions of horror as our collective unconscious—as “monsters from the id”—returning in fiendish forms.39

“The true subject of the horror genre,” Robin Wood proposed in an important 1979 essay, “is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses.”40 Wood’s foundational analytic for the horror film—“normality is threatened by the monster”—reveals the construction of a social order as normality, of difference as horrific, and of the violent destruction of the monster as peacekeeping.41 The genre is therefore a “site of ideological contradiction”: horror films may depict attacks on our reality, but it is often reality itself that is truly the problem.42 A model of symptomatic reading in film studies, Wood’s understanding of the horror film has endured because it is a psychoanalytic theory that is also responsive to cultural history. The repressed always returns, but because what is repressed can change with time and place, so can the thematic, narrative, and iconographic preoccupations of horror films. This has been a highly influential—and redemptive—reading strategy for horror film studies. It has helped filmgoers and critics get past the “blood-soaked façade” of some of the “most degraded works of mass culture.”43 In the process the most disdained of popular film genres has become the most written about over the last few decades.

What “unconscious material” returns in Bombay horror?44 The films resurface ways of thinking and knowing rendered beyond the pale by scientific rationality in colonial and postcolonial India; Meraj Mubarki argues that the magic spells, chanting priests, and haunted feudal mansions within the films figure the persistence of what modernity says we have long left behind.45 Bodies and desires stigmatized by caste and patriarchal supremacy, Mithuraaj Dhusiya offers, are reflected in stories of witchcraft and vampirism in Indian horror films.46 The films also are, in Meheli Sen’s words, a “symptom of the frayed and unraveling political fabric of the 1970s and 1980s.”47 Sen posits that the state-sanctioned “lawlessness, crime, and violence” pervading India in the 1970s and 1980s are addressed
by the genre’s “symbolic ruses.” In the wake of such substantial scholarship on the supernatural genres of Indian cinema and the cultural histories they signify, Seeing Things offers a slightly different perspective on Bombay horror.

My argument is also premised on the idea that images signify, but that they do so in their materiality. For the repressed to return on-screen in horror films, that repressed must first be expressed: in, as, and through the cinematic medium. Bandh Darwaza’s visual and aural forms comprise the perceptual surface that we read as an allegory of monstrous otherness. But these forms ought not to be entirely vaporized by symbolic reading. “Criticism of the horror film,” argues Jonathan Crane, will often “willfully deny the [genre’s] gruesome spectacle.” “In this act of intentional blindness,” Crane claims, “looking past what carries a brutal charge, horror imagery is treated as a particularly bloody variation of insubstantial and inconsequential maya.” Crane is, broadly speaking, correct, but there has been an important current in horror film scholarship that is attentive to what is on-screen. “What we see is what we see,” Steven Shaviro writes, adding that “the figures that unroll before us cannot be regarded merely as arbitrary representations or conventional signs.” Challenging conceptualizations of cinema as imaginary signifier, ideological illusion, or empty simulacrum, Shaviro asks not what horror films hide but what they show: “nothing but images,” “composed only of flickering lights, evanescent noises, and insubstantial figures.” This line of thinking shifts our understanding of the content of a horror film. Bandh Darwaza is horrific not only for what its images mean, but for what they are: an atmospheric assemblage in which darkness swallows the frame and sound is silenced. Meaning emerges from the coordinated assault of filmic elements, rather than being a prior set of values expressed in film style.

While it draws attention to how form creates horror, the notion of film style somewhat abstracts the dimensional texture of horror images into programmatic considerations of “line and color.” The vampire’s cape, his creaking coffin: these are formal entities in a patterned arrangement—visual shapes and sonic intensities—but these details have an unfolding presence that takes up space and time onscreen. Such an approach sees the “materiality of cinema . . . wielding an expressive force” beyond what can be paraphrased about a film. For Adrian Martin, these are the
“millions of atomic details” by which a film makes its “moves” on us: how a film can “change its temperature, shift its focus, raise its stakes, modulate its mood, thicken its atmosphere, or scramble its hitherto established premises.”

Because “we take in all these details,” tracking film’s expressive materiality requires switching between scales of close reading—from the synoptic to the granular—and adjusting “definitions of what constitutes the minimum identifiable unit for analysis.”

“Close reading,” Eugenie Brinkema writes, “begins with a serious, rigorous, careful interpretation of textual specificity.” In film, she clarifies, “that means attending to framing, montage, mise en scène, color and light, rhythm, texture, sound,” while “bracket[ing] entirely things like production history and context” and “the long and many forms of reception theory.”

What I found, however, was something else. Staring at Bandh Darwaza’s display of verdant valleys, I was confronted with an instance of what seemed like a daytime shoot that was insufficiently incorporated into the fiction. I could not quite list this as an instance of “montage” or “mise-en-scène” or “point-of-view shot”: seams had opened up in how I had learned to segment film style. The closeup of the vampire’s face gazing off-screen did not fit with what I saw next, a panning camera widely composing a sun-bathed mountain range. A difficulty arose in the reading. Bandh Darwaza’s sunlit slopes may appear to be neither symbol nor style, but they are there all the same. When confronted with what seemingly exceeds signification and stylization, representational and formal readings should expand out and zoom in, switching in and out of disciplinary scales of reading. The closer I got to the textured density of the film, the more I felt the text’s many contexts unbracketing themselves—the stronger I perceived histories of production and reception pressing on the film.

Seeing Things proposes that we need a stronger, sharper vocabulary to understand the role of this materiality in our experience of film: how the materiality of the medium shapes our aesthetic apprehension of cinematic storytelling. Across the humanities, researchers dissatisfied with the narrow range of what could be studied as communication—as discourse, signification, representation—continue to navigate the “material turn.” They argue that the history of human expression cannot be understood without heeding the means of expression: the stuff through, in, and as which ideas, thoughts, and feelings are expressed. Consequently,
the material cultures of the past are not only deposits of but determinants of symbolic cultures. Advancing insights from art history, anthropology, and archaeology, film and media scholars have excavated the material cultures of film production and circulation to write new film histories. While the insights of this material turn are vast and varied, one of its consequences is a better appreciation of what Caetlin Benson-Allott calls the “significance of apparatus in the creation of affect.”

This is a materialist approach that advances from the “old” materialisms, which focused on how the means of production determined aesthetic forms. What I have in mind here is closer to strains in film and media theory which emphasize how symbolic differences originate in the physical differences between inscriptive media. The meaning of a representation, after all, is inseparable from its means; this inseparability paves the way for what Hannah Frank has called a “materialist aesthetics.” Seeing Things explores how the properties of celluloid, uses of paper, affordances of latex, and limits of plastic shaped Bombay horror. Horror films seek to evoke otherworldly places and beings, but to do so they must draw on the resources available in this world. In order to exploit our common fears, horror filmmakers have developed formal conventions by mastering the medium’s affordances, what it can and cannot do. A materialist aesthetics can be better attuned to how the medium’s limits productively determine the genre’s affective power. The failures of Bombay horror provide just such an opening.

FAILURES OF HORROR

The materiality of Bombay horror is more present to us now than ever before—in the “very moment that ‘things,’ at least the way we thought we once knew them, appear to be on their way out.” Haunting the contemporary dream of immateriality, the seemingly obsolete physicalities of film stock, Foley sound effects, monster makeup, or celluloid film projection become more visible to us with each passing day. Consequently, cinematic storytelling of the twentieth century too comes into view as “a set of conventions” derived from the “material conditions of a given technical support.” These conventions are the result of filmmakers grappling
with the “enabling impediment” of film’s photographic limits, its framing enclosure, its flickering movements. Mary Ann Doane argues that this process of reckoning with the resistance of the medium has been productive, for in “its very resistance, matter generates the forms and modes of aesthetic apprehension.” Rather than boundlessness, Doane suggests, it is the bounded medium of celluloid that brought artists and audiences together to complete the illusion. How a camera can (and cannot) move; how sound and image can (and cannot) be combined; how filmstrips can (and cannot be) joined: these have driven the aesthetic form of the genre, shaping the way we know the world in the horror film. For example, it is an affordance of the medium that exposure to light will cause an image to form on film. Multiple images can thus be formed on the same film by repeatedly exposing it to light, yet each exposure will also degrade pictorial clarity. We see this (in)capacity exploited in Bandh Darwaza, which overlays the vampire’s face and a flying bat to create stutteringly eerie views of magic metamorphosis. The sensational promise of the genre is entirely reliant on the skill with which the form of film is mastered (a theme I take up in greater detail in the first chapter).

The history of horror, writes Adam Charles Hart, is a “history of artists figuring out how to use the formal possibilities of their medium.” This history is long, dating back to the origins of cinema. From the start, cinema’s uncanny capacity to capture the invisible world—to break habituated perception via time-lapse or close-up—was allegorized in stories of strange bodies, time travel, and waking dreams, as well as the “special effects” that summoned them. In her account of the films of the 1890s and early twentieth century, Stacey Abbott notes a “preoccupation with the fantastic as a means of showcasing the spectral nature of film.” From the use of negative images to jump cuts, Abbott chronicles the centrality of film’s photochemical and physical properties in early evocations of a favorite figure: the vampire.

Writing about 1922’s Nosferatu, Abbott argues that the film’s use of a “slow dissolve to suggest the vampire’s disintegration in the rays of the sun” heralded a “new convention in the first major vampire film,” one “strongly linked to the fact that light is the essence of cinema.” As she goes on to explain: “It is light that burns an image onto film and then projects that image onto a screen. Orlok, a creature of the night, fades away
in the sunlight in the same manner that a photograph or the image on a strip of celluloid fades into nothingness when overexposed.”72 For Abbott, this “suggests that the vampire is made up of similar properties as film itself.”73 A materialist aesthetics is therefore attuned to the “specific ways in which sound and imaging technologies physically manifest themselves to the participating viewer in the event of the encounter.”74 The “uncanny body” of 1931’s Dracula, Robert Spadoni has argued, was shaped by the limited ability to synchronize the sight of speaking screen characters with the sound of their voices, helping generate horror in early sound film.75 Especially in moments of historical transition—such as the arrival of sound or color film stock, digital filmmaking, or streaming technologies—the materiality of the apparatus is perceptible in the narrative and visual conventions of films.76

Take, for example, our fear of the dark. This fear may be culturally learned, biologically hardwired, or “biocultural”; whatever the case, horror films have consistently explored the abyssal darkness of the night, of dim recesses, and obscure depths.77 In Bombay’s horror films, darkness and its denizens multiply. In Jaani Dushman, a monster pounces on wedding processions at dusk. In Purana Mandir, a curse strikes childbearing women as lightning splits open the night sky. In Khooni Murda, a serial killer strikes during a love song. In Hatyarin (Murderess, Vinod Talwar, 1991), a man lifts the veil on his bride to discover an evil crone awaiting him on his suhaag raat (wedding night). These are the moments in which the horror of Bombay horror is most palpable; the films come alive in the transgression of Bombay cinema’s long-reigning fantasies of musical romance and familial bliss.

In order to film the dark, however, makers of horror have had to confront a fundamental limit of the medium. Light triggers the photochemical reaction in which whatever is before the camera is captured on celluloid film. Because many film stocks respond poorly to the absence of light, filmmakers have learned to create darkness onscreen by shooting in daylight and then darkly tinting the footage in development. This innovation, known as day-for-night shooting, indicates how one seemingly abstract convention of horror—the night—is the product of a material practice. But horror films are comprised of many such conventions. Genre films, as Edward Buscombe states, are “composed of an outer
form consisting of a certain number of visual conventions”: “guns, cars, clothes” constitute gangster films, while “castles, coffins, and teeth” constitute horror films. 78 For filmmakers working outside genre, it may very well be the “subject matter that determines the outer form, not the other way round. . . . [T]he thing the director wants to say will decide the form he or she uses.” 79 As Buscombe draws our attention to the iconography of genre films, we note that the outer form of genre is a “thing” as well: castles, coffins, and teeth—the constitutive shorthand of a film like Bandh Darwaza—have to be located, fabricated, and photographed. Conventions must be realized for each shot, scene, or film; the form of horror must be performed for the camera. The repetitive reproduction of a convention generates production expertise and audience familiarity, but each performance of the convention is also a risk. The performative instant creates an opening, as filmmaking enters a zone of possible failure in front of the lens. Indeed, it is by analyzing the resultant “fractures of signification”—in this case, what we see on film rather than what the film may want to show us—that a kind of truth about cinema comes into view. 80

Watching Bombay horror today, I feel the globally familiar conventions of horror films sputter in the flux of actualization, as hairy beasts, cursed objects, and sticky gore come to be riddled with small disappointments. In Khooni Mahal, a man transforms into a vampire before my eyes: I see him grow fangs. Yet the angle and duration of the close-up permit me to perceive the actor pushing fake fangs out of his mouth. Similar fiascos have impressed themselves on other critics, viewers, and scholars. Sangita Gopal writes that the “entire Ramsay oeuvre (and that of its imitators) is unmistakably B-movie,” featuring “garish and unconvincing sets” and “monsters that veered to the side of kitsch.” 81 Similarly, Rachel Dwyer describes the films of the Ramsay Brothers as “often (bad) copies of western films” that had “very basic special effects.” 82 Meheli Sen notes that they contain “horror set pieces involving burly monsters in old mansions,” “tacky prosthetic makeup,” “patently fake blood and gore,” and “rudimentary special effects.” 83 These are, as she puts it, the results of “abysmal production values,” further exposed by “flimsy, often utterly inchoate plots” and “inept performances.” 84 These descriptions get at an ambient accidental quality that also characterizes my experience of Bombay horror. Because the films solicit my attention most when they are at their most
conventionally horrific, I find myself rapt by such moments—and their malfunctioning minutiae.

Since failures are often felt in horror, science fiction, and action films, genres with long histories of low-budget production in many parts of the world, the “excess of visibility” may be connected to an impression of lack.\(^8^5\) The genres’ fantastical stories trade in and tolerate what would be considered failures of editing, lighting, performance, or storytelling according to standards set by realism. Still, the feeling that an element of the film—such as the daylight of Bandh Darwaza—is attracting too much attention prompts judgment that not enough expertise, energy, or economic resources were invested in integrating it into the film’s “smooth perceptual cues.”\(^8^6\) Roughness at crucial moments of cinematic spectacle makes transparent not only the materiality on which the spectacle depends but also the aggressively enthusiastic drive to summon it on a budget.\(^8^7\)

Some of the most iconic horror films of all time were low-budget productions. To give two examples: Night of the Living Dead (George Romero, 1968) and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) were made on a shoestring by American independent producers after the collapse of the studio system in Hollywood. Indeed, the collapse of the studio system ushered in a new age of horror; films of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s evidence an “overwhelming sense of weirdness,” without “striv[ing] above all for expediency”—for the “perfect match of signifying device and (usually narrative) signified.”\(^8^8\) Instead, they are lauded for their “pragmatic aesthetics,” “in which budgetary and technical compromises are made to work aesthetically,” that is, to “serve” the story.\(^8^9\) But sometimes things may not quite “work”: the “cinematic tools” used may, to use Thomas Sipos’s term, “sabotage” the story.\(^9^0\) Failures are judged to have happened when we perceive that the “intentionality of authorship and narrative requirement” has come “into conflict with the strategies of execution and the primarily budgetary limitations placed upon them.”\(^9^1\) Typically, when something on-screen fails—when it is more or less there than we think it should be—viewers assume it was not given enough time, craft, or money to be smoothly incorporated into the film’s fiction and move on. What if viewers did not move on?

When scholars scrutinize images for breakdown, seams, and mismatches, such as when Anand Pandian chronicles the “failure of actors and equipment to act and react as they should” in his ethnography of
Tamil film production, they also call on us to be mindful of the fertility of failure in jamming the punitive and painful regulation of conventions. Human beings are in their mere materiality often judged to be failing a normative ideal—some social or cultural convention—that is correctly embodied by someone else, somewhere else. Failure, then, reveals the political valence of aesthetic judgment, or how our differently racialized, gendered, classed, or sexualized bodies may be judged to be failing in their very physical existence. Likewise, the “ruptured body” of films made for tertiary circuits and audiences—films derisively termed grindhouse, exploitation, or “B movies”—are frequently seen to be “lacking the kind of integrity commonly attributed to popular narrative cinema.” Ruptures can bring viewers back to reality, so that “the spectator is brought abruptly back to discontinuity—that is, to the body, to the technical apparatus which he had forgotten.” There is joy for some scholars in lack, signaling an attack on the hegemony of “well made” films and reminding us that film is a “performative production.” A mutual measure of “failed seriousness” or camp is activated, an attitude that revels in “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” by drawing attention to the constructedness of a convention or observing it in breakdown.

For example, one might be able to see that the monster in *Curse of the Swamp Creature* (Larry Buchanan, 1968), though “intended to be a startling and menacing cinematic revelation,” is “simply an overweight actor standing in weeds with ping-pong balls attached to his eyes on a hot day in Dallas in 1966.” Akin to the distancing effects of avant-garde or experimental film, screen failures, Becky Bartlett suggests, “obliterate disbelief and thereby “dismantle the illusory potential of cinema.” So-called bad films are valuable to cult audiences because they can “reveal modes of production that are otherwise concealed in ‘good’ films.” In “moments of impoverished excess,” concludes Jeffrey Sconce, the “diegesis becomes the thin and final veil that is the indexical mark” of “the film’s construction.”

This book grapples with that thin, final veil and the divergent desires it sparks. When failures happen at the scene of horror, they don’t always break the spell. Film may be a ghostly medium, but its images of the past are also “material ghosts.” These sights and sounds take up space and time—they matter—on-screen, but they also move through our space and time: they matter to us as viewers. Sometimes the failures of Bombay
horror deepen the disturbance, putting the materiality of filmmaking into play as constitutive of cinematic conventions and their effects. In such cases, *Seeing Things* sticks close to the veil, even when it is at its most distractingly diaphanous or disruptively depleted: by incorporating the impoverished excess on-screen into my experience of the story world (what Sconce calls the “diegesis”).

When the veil falls, I can read visible failure as an automatic imprint (what Sconce terms an “indexical mark”) of the film’s historical creation, tinging the expressive materiality of horror’s otherworldly fantasy with an evidentiary materiality of the recent past. *Indexicality*, in film studies, usually refers to the automatic inscriptions of physical reality generated by the photochemical reaction of exposed film to light, such that what is on film is said to point back to its referent, the “profilmic” reality that was once in front of the camera. When a contingent performance in front of the lens is registered by the machinic performance of the camera, the result is a photographic image. The photograph, as Roland Barthes wrote, “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially,” forever stamped with an adhesive referentiality that brings the past into the present.\(^\text{103}\) Because of this indexical capacity, film has been likened to a “ghostly medium” that shows us what was once before the camera and is no more; a medium that can reveal physical reality to us better than our senses can.\(^\text{104}\) The indexical marks of Bombay horror range from ostensibly accidental elements of the filmed image—continuity errors, bad acting, clumsy effects—to what can more properly be called sonic or “avisual” elements of the film—jarring splices, changeover cues, and electronic noise.\(^\text{105}\) For these traces to matter as indices of the past, I developed a materialist historiography of Bombay horror.

**A MATERIALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY OF BOMBAY HORROR**

Things have lives in Bombay horror. Doors open and close by themselves. Portraits look back at their owners. Statues shift, instantiating a pervasive trope of horror films more generally: objects in horror are seemingly possessed of an agency independent of the human beings who purchased, found, stole, or inherited them (and who must, as so often happens at the
end of horror films, destroy them). Before such things are destroyed, however, they are made: by someone exhaling a dying breath, desperate incantation, or vengeful curse. In Bandh Darwaza, the vampire can only be vanquished when a totemic putla (miniature) is destroyed: a wooden sculpture of a bat that must be set on fire. The vampire’s naapak shakti (profane power) inheres in this object, but that power was placed there by his own magic touch. This is the lesson taught by horror film after horror film. Things do, because something was done to them. They are things touched by human history, even when they appear to be beyond human control. They have lives because they were shaped by living hands. The failures of Bombay horror too are visionary intimations of filmmaking history, traces of how the films were produced, regulated, and circulated.

The traces may appear to be too minor or idiosyncratic to be of general significance: a prismatic play of color over the story world or sounds of vehicular traffic during an intimate conversation. But paying attention to insignificant details is a core practice for cinephiles, who watch films repeatedly while engaging their “panoramic perception” of “peripheral details.” Such details are typically stylistic elements that exceed—in duration, design, display, or other aspects of “treatment”—the demands of a film’s narrative. Unassimilated into the “system of representation,” a camera movement or frame composition might appear possessed of a “metafictional edge that operates as an indirect/oblique commentary on representation.” That commentary is attributed to the film’s director, the auteur who leaves inside the repetitive, industrialized work of genre film production their personal signature in stylistic flourishes like so many secrets. The details in Bombay horror that occupy me did not seem to have been put into the scene intentionally by anyone, popping up instead as inconsequential trifles. Nonetheless, they were like the “moments of intense yet inscrutable audiovisual pleasure” devoured by cinephiles and served as a “spark” for what Rashna Wadia Richards labels a “materialist film historiography.” A materialist film historiography treats what is on-screen as the momentary instantiation of a material world, a networked materiality under arrest: emulsion leaking from a film print or a film being dubbed inside a moving van. For the traces of Bombay horror to matter, I had to shift from seeing them as one-off mistakes to seeing them as the routinized output of systems of filmmaking.
Contemporary techno-culture and capitalist innovation champion planned obsolescence: “failing fast, failing often.” Haunting this euphoria of nonstop progress toward an imminent future of cybernetic transcendence is the obstinate wreckage of development: whether as toxic landfill or circulating scrap, the past remains present, the very materiality of human history presenting as a failure to become immaterial. In order to make “visible what is actually present,” scholars in philosophy, literature, sociology, anthropology, architecture, and cultural studies have led a “spectral turn” to center ghostly traces, suppressed memories, and occult logics that challenge the drive to modern transparency, linear time, developmental progress, economic rationality, and written history. Ghosts “indicate that beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story.” To tell that story, write Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, “requires a perspective combining a materialist with an affective, sensuous dimension.” An emergent counteraesthetics of glitch, noise, and trash contests the prevailing rhetoric of endless perfectibility and seamless capture, preserving errors as “meaningful symbols of a broader human struggle.” Bombay horror offers an accidental archive of such struggle, of how the world’s largest film culture has endured state control, production scarcity, and circulatory challenges. The spectral materialities of Bombay horror were generated when small acts of urban jugaad (improvisation), labor mobilization, subaltern circulation, and transgressive imagination collided with the forces of labor informalization, bureaucratic control, violent policing, and moral panic. These contexts have implicitly informed much scholarship on the genre, but they remain underrepresented, underresearched and undertheorized. Widening my scope beyond what I have previously termed the Ramsay Brothers’ “cottage industry of terror,” Seeing Things investigates the industrial production, institutional regulation, and public circulation of Bombay horror across the 1980s.

This book began as a project to understand how the horror films of 1980s Bombay were made and seen. Accordingly, archival research and ethnographic fieldwork—not close analysis—were the privileged methodological instruments for tapping the historical circuits of production and circulation. I found that documentary records of the period were plentiful, scattered across Delhi, Mumbai, and Pune: trade magazines like Film Information, Trade Guide, Variety, and Screen; reportage in Hindi- and
English-language newspapers and magazines including *Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *Manushi*, *Madhuri*, *Stardust*, *Cine Blitz*, *Filmfare*, and *India Today*; government files and film publicity preserved at the National Film Archive; and censorship records and court orders published in the *Gazette of India*. Yet these archives presented the challenge of how to retrieve stories of thrilling images (that were deleted), creative work (that was devalued), and popular films (that were ignored). I gathered interviews for more than a decade, amassing dozens of oral narratives by speaking to directors including Tulsi Ramsay, Mohan Bhakri, and Vinod Talwar, as well as the actors, makeup artists, optical effects artists, stunt directors, distributors, and exhibitors they worked with. During many of these interviews, questions about specific scenes or films routinely generated blank stares and long silences from actors and actresses, film directors and producers, costume launderers, and stunt performers, many of whom I had sought out precisely because they had worked on these films. Bombay’s horror films, I realized, were partly condemned to the same oblivion that shrouds much of the 1980s Bombay film industry.

Bombay horror is an example of the “upside down,” a cinema in which performers, audiences, and genres sidelined by blockbuster cinema ruled. An account of this “upside down” cinema also pushes something else to the top: the physical realities of filmmaking. While advising the need to “crack open the category of ‘popular’ cinema to reveal the diversity within,” Lotte Hoek warns that “peculiarly lopsided case selections in cinema and film culture push from view the prevalence of flop films featuring B actors, failing equipment in studios and theaters, plagiarizing scriptwriters, or frayed third-run movies spliced beyond recognition in dilapidated tin-roofed rural cinemas.” Hoek’s sturdy itemization of images, circuits, and practices implies that different films invite (or incite) differently material histories, and that canon formation and film historiography regulate the degree to which materiality matters. Within her itemization, we can also detect a dialectic that is central to this book: the dialectic of material crisis and material creativity.

Crisis has been a durable drumbeat in the “melodrama of Bollywood as a culture industry.” As Nitin Govil reminds us, crisis talk permeates discourses of film production, censorship, and circulation, whether in the 1960s or the 2000s. What is missed in this “historiography of crisis” is
how the film industry “reemerges in the face of predation and dire odds,” how the “permanence of crisis” is the “engine” of “innovation.” Seeing Things argues that the failures of Bombay horror don’t simply index the widespread and undifferentiated chaos of filmmaking; rather, they register how specific crises were navigated, managed, and contained by the practices of filmmaking.

Practice, as Debashree Mukherjee writes, is a “repetitive activity oriented to a future.” The movies remembered those practices, extending my reach into the past. Where institutional, industrial, and individual memories have faded or fallen short, films remembered in their very failure to represent. The close analysis of films was transformed by the sensitivity to stuff, filling the breach where my archival and ethnographic endeavors failed. I began treating the finished film as a series of production stills, working as I was with a paucity of behind-the-scenes documentation or production stills typically generated for promotion or posterity. When I could not get my hands on a court file or be admitted inside a nineteenth-century palace that served as a filming location, I returned to the films. The speculative reorientation of the textual trace has been an important methodological innovation within film studies, a response to the geopolitics of preservation wherein the past must be accessed differently for histories of difference. Bringing materialist analysis and sensuous appreciation together in close reading, Seeing Things brings film back into the fold with the archives of a new cinema history, casting the mise-en-scène of Bombay horror as a field in which to do research and a formal force to contend with.

While Bombay horror’s representations are an “important index of an especially turbulent period in India’s history,” the films’ failures are symptoms of the turbulent history of filmmaking during the same period. The failures of Bombay horror allow us to glimpse the dynamics that shape the materialities of filmmaking, the decisions that were made in order to create irrational worlds within a fundamentally rational, if slightly unpredictable, medium. The materialities of filmmaking convert cultural past into cinematic presence, but these materialities are themselves social, political, and historical things that are encoded into light and sound. After observing something on-screen—for instance, the foam mattress supporting an ancient sarcophagus—I moved outward to find out more, following the
film’s networks of human labor, energy, finance, and resources along which things are displaced till they reach their resting place before the camera and become visual images. Following Bombay horror’s spectral materialities like crumbs back into a lost world, the book reconstructs the force field of technology, finance, creativity, and moral panic that enmeshed the films. How an actor wore a mask, when a prop was moved, when a censor objected most to a film—these are things that happened and what happened to things, on film sets, in laboratories, courtrooms, government offices, movie theaters, and video parlors.

Seeing Things conceives of filmmaking corporeally, as a series of tactile encounters in which humans, machines, and environments were incipiently instantiated as embodied presences (and then disembodied as they receded from those encounters). As I use the term here, corporeality names the relational experience of becoming body. Recently, Usha Iyer has explored the potential of a “corporeal history” of film bodies, one that makes visible bodies that are embedded in the production process but erased from visual legibility by a film’s fictional and press discourses. Corporeal history is a methodology that reveals the onscreen body as a “composite” assemblage made up of other bodies, such as the on-screen dancing body, as made up of backup dancers, doubles, and dance teachers. I too expand corporeal history beyond the visible to include bodies that were never in front of the camera or even, properly speaking, human. In its pursuit of bodies that touched props, filmstrips, masks, and projection reels, Seeing Things discovered the embodied practices of creative excitement, anxious unease, and desirous cinephilia that made, managed, and moved films inscribed in the scene of horror: how performers, machines, and their environments may have mutually interacted and materialized in the process of generating moving images.

What I found was that before the “unconscious material” of classed, gendered, and sexual anxieties could “return” on-screen, these anxieties marked the conscious materialization of images in the work of film making. Bombay horror was, after all, an industrial art form, the behind-the-scenes reality of which was shaped by the same historical forces that acquired allegorical form in on-screen fictions. For example, the opening of Bandh Darwasa indicates how the tools of continuity editing, including shot/reverse shot and eyeline matching, operated to link elements
of studio photography (the vampire’s lair) and location filming (the hills). The daylight helps bring into view what that location was—the Western Ghats outside Bombay—but it also raises new questions about why the cinematic geography of Bombay horror took the particular shape it did. I answer these questions later in the book, arguing that the cost and volatility of filming in Bombay’s studios propelled innovations in the iconography of horror: that we can “see” in the films’ forbidden, faraway places a solution to the lightning strikes called by below-the-line workers in the city’s studios. The atmosphere of horror thus compresses the social, political, and historical materiality of film making, but this materiality, typically encoded into the oneiric landscapes of horror, only swims into view in moments of failure. If there had been no daylight between me and the film, I may never have thought to even ask these questions, let alone look for answers.

C R I S I S A N D C R E A T I V I T Y I N T H E 1 9 8 0 S
B O M B A Y F I L M I N D U S T R Y

Seeing Things tracks the cycle of Bombay horror from its origins to its end, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. It also tracks the lifecycle of films from production to circulation, with a caveat: the book explores the censorship of horror films (in the late 1970s) before examining the making of horror films (in the mid-1980s). This inversion challenges the priority of industrial practices over state control, instead showing how governmental censorship received, revised, and remade—effectively, produced—the first horror films and so influenced the shape of the cycle to come.

Originating with the colonial administrations of the British Raj, film censorship remains the most prominent instance of cultural regulation by the Indian state. Whatever reasons the censors have had for censoring a film—such as obscenity, subversion, and criminal incitement—scholars of Indian film censorship have revealed the reasons beneath those reasons: paternalism, elitism, the anxieties of an old colonial order, the aspirations of a new nation-state, pressures from the mob, and pressures from the market.126 This disciplinary drive increasingly impinges on the freedom of expression enshrined in the nation’s constitution, as autocratic intercession of democratic expression in India is extended by pressure groups whipping up moral panics over cinema. “Anxiety about the filmic image”
has manifested in the Indian state’s “continuous effort to discipline and regulate films, filmmaking, and filmmakers.” Seeing Things tracks the materiality of the effort to regulate the origins of Bombay horror in the late 1970s, enhancing the picture of ideological and affective control with a focus on filmstrip editing and bureaucratic paperwork. Close attention to the physical practices of censorship—how censors censor—textures our understanding of what was censored and why.

In the summer of 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had a state of “internal emergency” declared to quell opposition from trade, student, and government unions (and to remain in power after a court conviction over electoral misconduct.) For the next twenty-one months, blackouts descended on printing presses, journalists were detained en masse, public assembly was curtailed, civil disobedience movements were banned, and dissenting news stories were killed. When film producers complained of increased oversight of the film capital by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in the nation’s political capital, the minister of information and broadcasting was said to be “furious” and “ordered the Censor Board not to pass films, to make more and more cuts, and generally to harass the producers.” When the Emergency ended in 1977, the state invested in increasing bureaucratization as the path to procedural transparency, while filmmakers and viewers became keenly aware of censorship’s power to make images (and films) disappear. If, as Meheli Sen has argued, “the Ramsay film emblematically captures the zeitgeist of Emergency and post-Emergency India,” reconstructing the material terrain of censorship allows us to see how the politics of this transitional period are registered in paper files and celluloid damage.

Chapter 1 chronicles the censorship of “India’s First Horror Film,” Darwaza, by reconstructing the paper trail of the film’s regulation by the Bombay censors. What the censors describe as “scenes of horror,” I argue, reveals their corporeal response to the physical affordances of film—its manipulability via looping, dissolves, and stop-motion effects—by which Darwaza surfaced a spectral time on-screen. They may be causes of despair to filmmakers, but state documents can give film scholars a peek into the bureaucratic world of film censorship as its own “scene of horror.” The chapter’s engagement with the phantom touch that haunts the medium of film sets the stage for the spectral materialities explored in the subsequent chapters.
Chapter 2 moves from “behind the scenes” and into the scene by examining scratches, leaks, and other visual damage in *Jaani Dushman*. Before the film was released, “lingering details” of horror were purged under an order from the Bombay High Court. The chapter probes the effect of this intervention on the film’s style and story world, giving us a tactile sense that censorship is what censorship does. While a werewolf hunts young brides in the valley, celluloid splatters in sequences of abduction, murder, and dismemberment as masking tape and cutting blade tear through the film’s haunted frames and color film stock. The state’s regulatory effort infects the body of Bombay horror, thickening the genre’s motifs of strange belief, graphic violence, and blocked vision.

The origins of Bombay horror offer a privileged point of entry into the material cultures of film censorship. “To censors the world over,” Mark Kermode has remarked, horror films “present an insurmountable problem: How to make acceptable a brand of filmmaking which strives to be thoroughly unacceptable?” This effort to make Bombay horror acceptable unfolded slowly, generating a wealth of objects including workprints, cuts, paperwork, and informal meetings over weeks, then months, and finally years. At the same time, filmmakers navigated the structures and strictures of censorship through a range of informal tactics, including exploiting the inefficiencies of government bureaucracy and devising cinematic strategies to ward off scrutiny. Files, censor scripts, application letters, official memoranda, cut pieces of footage, and censor certificates are the props by which I reconstruct a dramaturgy of censorship. Far from being proof of total ideological control or affective containment, these things disclose a censorship machine that worked and broke, failed and overheated when exposed to cinematic horror: paperwork logs feelings that are felt, or a cut was too clumsily visible. In the process, disclaimers are scribbled and celluloid is disfigured—censorship transformed the aesthetic experience of Bombay’s first horror films and eventually the stylistic preferences and production practices of those making horror films.

By the mid-1980s the strict surveillance of screen violence by the Indian government forced filmmakers to redirect the widespread preference for showing over telling that was making the horror genre more graphic in other parts of the world. Instead, filmmakers expended effort to
generate horror by other means: Bombay horror’s affective lures would be gothic spaces, haunted objects, and creaturely transformations—and these had to be produced quickly. Following the box office success of the Ramsay Brothers’ *Purana Mandir*, a dozen horror films were in development, postproduction, or release at the same time. *Seeing Things* explores the atmospheric and mechanical craft of horror at the peak of the genre’s popularity: how surreal atmospheres and grotesque monsters produce the horror of Bombay horror, and how these spaces and bodies themselves were produced behind the scenes.

In her discussion of popular genre pictures of the Hindi film industry, Valentina Vitali has documented the “economic pressures that generated the films as commodities and which, in so doing, left the marks of their interests in the body of the texts.” Vitali capaciously reads the gestures, conventions, and even accidents of stunt figures on-screen— their varied “efforts”— in a mimetic relationship to the Hindi film industry’s efforts to industrialize and stabilize its production economy and circulation networks. In more recent and related work, Vitali has argued that the horror film emerged when it did in Bombay because speculative finance, or what she terms “radical capital,” until then “contained by the Indian government’s economic policies,” was unleashed in the late 1970s. These large reserves of undeclared cash had to circulate quickly, leading to the overproduction of films. “India once again tops in film production,” the trade journal *Screen* noted in 1982, including 150 Hindi films from Bombay in its annual count of 1,000 films made across the country that sold an estimated four hundred million tickets.

Following the government’s centralization of credit, a new type of financier emerged in the film business, looking to launder “black” money into “white.” This parallel economy, which grew as India’s official economy shrank, needed low-budget films that could move quickly through production and exhibition pipelines. The horror films of the Ramsay Brothers, Vitali argues, transcribe these considerations as narrative and mise-en-scène: in the “ruthless financial speculation” they often depict as setting off stories of dispossession, violation, and haunting, as well as in the “imploded frontality” and unstable views of the action. Vitali sees correspondences between economic base and ephemeral images, with the base determining features of the images, as “no more and no less than an
indexical registration of the collapse of the apparatus that had, until then, sustained the ideological legitimacy of the Indian state.”

The economic and political history Vitali outlines forms the backdrop to Seeing Things, which fleshes out a world of filmmaking during the 1980s by spotlighting production design and special effects in Bombay horror. Scholars of Hindi cinema, including Clare Wilkinson, have tracked the collaborative practices between a film’s director and its cinematographer, choreographer, costumer, and production designer that have produced the visual worlds of big-budget romances, studio-era social films, and period dramas. To this complex terrain of production cultures, Seeing Things adds the practices of set designers, below-the-line crew, and makeup artists of Bombay horror. Zooming into the “historical materialist” forces invariably determining the film style, close attention to the aesthetic and design practice of the Ramsay Brothers as a film studio reveals how they tamed the financial and material crises of the “post-studio” era into a practice of house style.

Film historians have long sought to situate films in relation to the circumstances of their social, economic, and technological production. Moving past delineating modes of production in monolithic terms, new film histories illuminate the “pulsating traffic—of actors, performers, authors, technicians, technologies, genres, styles” through which the moving image is concretized. The precise nature of chemical accidents and poor performances on film also reveals the classed and gendered dimensions of film production as a “hustle” in the churn of the fast, ingenious, and dangerous—and an “ecology” consisting not only of skilled personnel but also of the technological processes and profilmic accidents they wrestled with. In such accidents, the assemblages, technologies, and practices of filmmaking also become visible, as accidents, improvisation, and chances taken—in short, contingencies—in the creative process of filmmaking are virtually embossed in the image.

Chapter 3 tracks how the Ramsay Brothers transformed existing buildings and locations into “forbidden places” for Purana Mandir. Situating the iconography of the faraway, haunted haveli as an economic solution to the rising costs of shooting inside studios—and away from a politically activated below-the-line workforce—I show how the atmosphere of horror derives from reused locations, depleted extras, and rogue props. Chapter 4
unveils the art of prosthetic special effects. Bringing creative personnel into contact with exciting and expressive materials, prosthetics were responsible for the arresting images at the heart of every Bombay horror film. A focus on this craft shows how the grotesque bodies of witches, vampires, and other monsters—visual ideologies of gendered and sexualized excess—were engineered. Yet prosthetic effects also exposed human bodies to the unstable properties of rubber and latex—and special effects sometimes exceeded craft in on-set accidents. A mask was botched during Veerana and filmed as it had unexpectedly latched itself onto the sweaty skin of its young star, transforming her into a monstrous materiality that lurches toward her victims. Narrated to me by a hairdresser who worked on the film, an anecdote of the accident discloses the gendered ideologies of disgust operative in makeup work and a material world beyond the masculine control of its makeup artists.

My goal is to reacquaint readers with the expressivity and materiality of film form—with the art of bodies, spaces, and objects that have for decades weathered elite disdain for the booming low-budget film culture of the 1980s. The fantastical visual worlds of Bombay horror were, according to a critic in India’s leading film magazine, Filmfare, “nowhere near the awesome technical masterpieces that [American filmmaker Steven] Spielberg’s creations are.”145 (“We don’t aspire to be Steven Spielberg,” Tulsi Ramsay once said. “We are quite happy the way we are.”)146 Against narratives of industrial failure, the visual worlds of Bombay horror reopen a different history of work, one remarkable for being so accomplished in conditions marked by exploitation, scarcity, and precarity.147 Those visual worlds quickly became iconic of the genre, widely displayed on hoardings and posters, captivating onlookers and drawing them into theaters.

One of the oft-repeated truths about Bombay’s horror films is that they catered to male, working-class, or rural audiences residing in small towns and villages, who watched the films in rundown theaters of the “B” or “C” circuit. Rather than reinforcing affective affinity between Bombay horror and its classed and gendered audiences, chapter 5 thinks tangibly about film circulation, or the paths that films take (and are given) in order to realize value. “The paucity of permanent movie theaters,” writes Sudhir Mahadevan, “has been a persistent backdrop to the history of movie exhibition [in India].”148 The nearly six thousand built theaters in operation
at the start of the 1980s (against a population of over six hundred million) were heavily monopolized, and Bombay horror’s producers struggled within this scarcity-driven and stratified filmmaking economy. “Film Industry Faces Problem of Boom” declared one industry headline—a problem because, given the immense scarcity of theaters in India, there were not enough screens for films to recoup their cost. Enter video. Often considered the cause of a “crisis” for the film industry—for the “fading glitter” of Hindi cinema “brought on by new technologies”—commercial video was, at least for a while, a source of financial sustenance and aesthetic possibility for filmmakers including Mohan Bhakri and Vinod Talwar. This brief window has left its mark on the films, in their stylistic strategies and in the static that strikes their images. Chapter 5 examines the transforming circuits of Bombay horror’s distribution, exhibition, and circulation across the arrival of commercial video cassettes in 1980s India. Along the way, the films have picked up the marks of projection damage, videotape degradation, and virtual circulation.

The marks of a film’s consumption across media, formats, platforms, and eras are also marks of value extraction—by producers, audiences, and scholars. Since its theatrical release, Bandh Darwaza has been seen in various forms: as celluloid; as videocassette; as television broadcast; as video compact disc; as DVD; and now online, as streaming media. In the process, the first prints of the film, projected in a few theaters in Bombay, have been transformed into digital files, which circulate online in illicit form. On our computer screens, it becomes easy to pause or pore over a frame, possible to see film objects as fractal relics. The twentieth century grows ever more remote—as does the original moment of the films I am studying—but the films come closer to me than ever before. In the epilogue, I reflect on the perpetual reanimation of Bombay horror and the temporality of failure, such as when I return to Bandh Darwaza to find that its daylight has turned back into night.

THE HORROR OF FAILURE

Failure is a function of time. Things betray their thingness they “stop working for us,” writes Bill Brown, underscoring how things betray their
essence when they refuse their assigned roles or proper place. Connoted in his description is also another sense: things reveal their thingness when they stop working for us—historical beings situated in a particular time or place. Conventions fall out of favor, and histories are forgotten: by us. The perception of something on-screen failing can sharpen with the passage of time and the arrival of new viewers to old images.

Seeing Things is the product of a widening historical gulf: between the past and the present of Bombay horror, between the films’ original viewers and me. This gulf also separates the film’s commercial audiences from scholars trained on a “Eurocentric set of references,” in a discipline for which American horror films have been “normalized as a route to theorizing horror film per se.” By judging a Bombay horror film to have failed, I also court failure in my reading of it. It is often a perceived failure that forces the intention into view: viewers discern “the appearance of intention” from the very scene that is felt to fail it. Viewers are actively parsing not only what is on-screen, but what is intended; without this interpretation of a film’s intention, the film cannot be said to have failed the illusion.

For much of its history, after all, popular Hindi cinema has not been illusionistic in the way popular American or European films are. Unlike films that “hide the fact that they are films, a Hindi film does not pretend that it is presenting an unmediated view of reality.” Yet the terms on which that reality is allowed to be visible—or forces itself into visibility—deserve engagement. Films are never solely “frozen in the time of their production or the hierarchy of someone else’s value system”; hermeneutic investments change, and there are revolutions in reading. Theories of horror may not have been developed with Bombay horror’s failures in mind, but theory can “be and remain conjectural, even tentative.” Theory is “creative,” Kyle Stevens asserts, because it “creates new ways of seeing things.” By indicating a materiality that may or may not have been intentionally included, failure can serve as a prompt for what makes horror films so disturbing.

What conception of horror emerges from the uncanon of Bombay horror? Moving between two orders of moving image materiality (the material presence of cinematic sounds and images on-screen, and their material past, when those images and sounds were forged off-screen), Seeing Things links the immersions of cinematic fantasy with the
illuminations of film history. Mediating this link between an aesthetics of horror and an account of behind-the-scenes practices is the felt materiality of a body genre. In Linda Williams’s important coinage, horror films are one of the “body genres” that aim to collapse the distance between bodies on-screen and the bodies of those watching the film. A character’s scream, sweating skin, pounding heartbeat, clammy hands, and nervous excitement may elicit the spectator’s own. Horror films have been favored objects for phenomenologists exploring the film experience or film as a perceptual event that mutually implicates and mimetically generates sensation and cognition. Scholars of horror have helped recover the cinematic experience as normatively “carnal,” “corporeal,” “haptic,” “sensuous,” and “tactile,” all terms used to belatedly give sensory perception back to the theoretical spectator. As Angela Ndalianis argues, for example, a scene of “bodily destruction” that is “depicted onscreen unrelentingly weaves its way offscreen and onto the body of the spectator,” who “extracts meaning from the body.” Bombay horror is replete with scenes of bodily destruction: a mother dying in the throes of labor because of a curse, a living man packed into plaster struggling to breathe, a vampire slitting open a wrist to feed. Yet these are also compelling scenes of creation. I am watching actors in writhing intensity or sweating under plaster, or the viscosity of synthetic blood pumping through tubes.

These scenes introduce the certainty of a real, historical touch—of very close contact between blades and film prints, faces and masks, workers and props, projectionists and reels—into the surreal story worlds of Bombay horror. That touch mediates between the bloodshot eyes of the deadly vampire and the nocturnal landscape he surveys: our sense of a tactile encounter involving a cameraperson, the device that is the camera, the photochemical substance that is film, land and light. Disturbing the illusory bond between the vampire and his line of sight, a fugitive feeling forms. There must have been other presences in the vampire’s cave in Bandh Darwaza. I see human skin peeping out from under latex makeup and scratches that break out over the images. Perhaps a fog machine was blowing into the cave, which is why those clouds lie close to the floor; an actor was moving under a spotlight; a sound track was layered with looped musical cues, Foley effects, and dubbed voices in distinct tracks that do not quite cohere. But I can never quite be sure.
A history of human interventions has created the film, but what is actually present are indexical marks that do not quite amount to infallible wisdom. Pressuring a revelationist definition of the documentary index, failures force us to see things without disclosing much more about them. If, as Robin Wood proclaimed, the “true subject” of horror films is a “struggle for recognition,” Bombay’s horror films also incite a struggle to recognize. They leave us suspended in the stretchy, liberatory possibilities of what Katherine Groo calls “bad film history”: speculation, uncertainty, and best guesses about the felt touch traced on-screen.

Whose eyes are we seeing through when we see the daylit hills? Horror films often present us with situations in which we sense someone seeing without being seen: we are forced to share the perspectives of monsters and masked killers, fostering a creepy dynamic of identification that is broken with the revelation of the seeing body and its destruction. No such revelation attends the point-of-view shot of the daylit hills, which cannot ever be attributed to a seeing subject within the film. This is what a materialist aesthetics can help us understand about the genre. The scratched surfaces, faded images, and unfinished bodies of Bombay horror indicate the multiple paths by which the affective impact of low-budget horror is achieved. Bombay horror prompts a different phenomenology of the horror film experience, cultivating the capacity for embodied viewing to feel an *other* material world encrypted in spectral forms on-screen. Film phenomenology—which has principally centered on the experiential bond between the projected image and my viewing body—can also cultivate a feeling for the embodied world of filmmaking, for how performers, machines, and their environments may have mutually interacted and materialized in the process of generating moving images. Scenes of horror fitfully expose us to technologies and objects that constitute the material world of film but also to the anonymous performers, censors, and audiences who were transforming that world into moving images. Something of this collective effort remains on display, charging the mise-en-scène with traces of human bodies who worked on these films and so inhere in this body genre.

Horror, writes Erin Huang, is not only a set of narrative or visual conventions in films. If we do not define horror solely as a “scripted and commodified feeling,” horror “opens up” as a “historical mode of perception
arising when the perceived external reality exceeds one’s internal frame of comprehension.” The spectral touch I sense is not reducible to the brute facts of what once happened behind the scenes. The processes and personnel I investigate historically are separate from, and ultimately not reducible to, the images that appear on-screen (and vice versa.) They assert only that something happened, but not what, why, or even quite how or who. The failures of Bombay horror are all indexical marks, but they do not confess much about their referents to us: whose skin, why bleached, when scratched? An indexical mark is only proof that “something has happened, that something exists or existed,” but that thing is of course remote and intangible. The index is an “impression left behind by a historical source we cannot see”; a record of physical contact,” it is “the trace of touch, of having been touched” that finally only “reasserts the centrality of its tactile operations.” Touch spectrally animates Bombay horror as a different kind of haunted archive in which we graze the past but don’t quite grasp it. Its details retain their secrecy, like ghosts who call out but will not give themselves up. The more I asked questions of images, the more haunted the images came to seem, indicating that the past would never pass fully out of view nor come fully into the light.