

Introduction

ACCIDENTAL EXPOSURES

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



Figure 1. Vampire surveying the darkness: detail from *Bandh Darwaza* (1990).
Source: Ramsay Pictures.

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



Figure 2. Daylit hills: 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.”² 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.”³ 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.⁴

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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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

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OPENING TOMORROW

THE DOOR TO NEW
EXCITEMENT IN
MOTION PICTURES!

INDIA'S FIRST HORROR FILM



(FOR ADULTS ONLY)

Swastik	Liberty
2.45, 6, 9.15	3.30, 6.30, 9.30

Satyam	Jailmandir
12.30, 3.30, 6.30, 9.30	12, 3, 6, 9

Bijalee
11.45, 3, 6.15, 9.30

Kala Mandir
4 shows

OSCAR - SANGAM - SAMRAT -
AJANTA - KALPANA - ODEON -
ASHISH - ANAND - REGENT -
NEW PRAKASH (Kalyan), FARHAN
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—S. A. ENTERPRISES RELEASE—

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Figure 4. Publicity for *Darwaza* (1978). Source: *Times of India*, 23 February 1978.

and gorgeous black-and-white photography, such films exercised the “mesmeric lure of the ghost story.”⁷ 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).⁸

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).⁹ 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.”¹⁰ *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

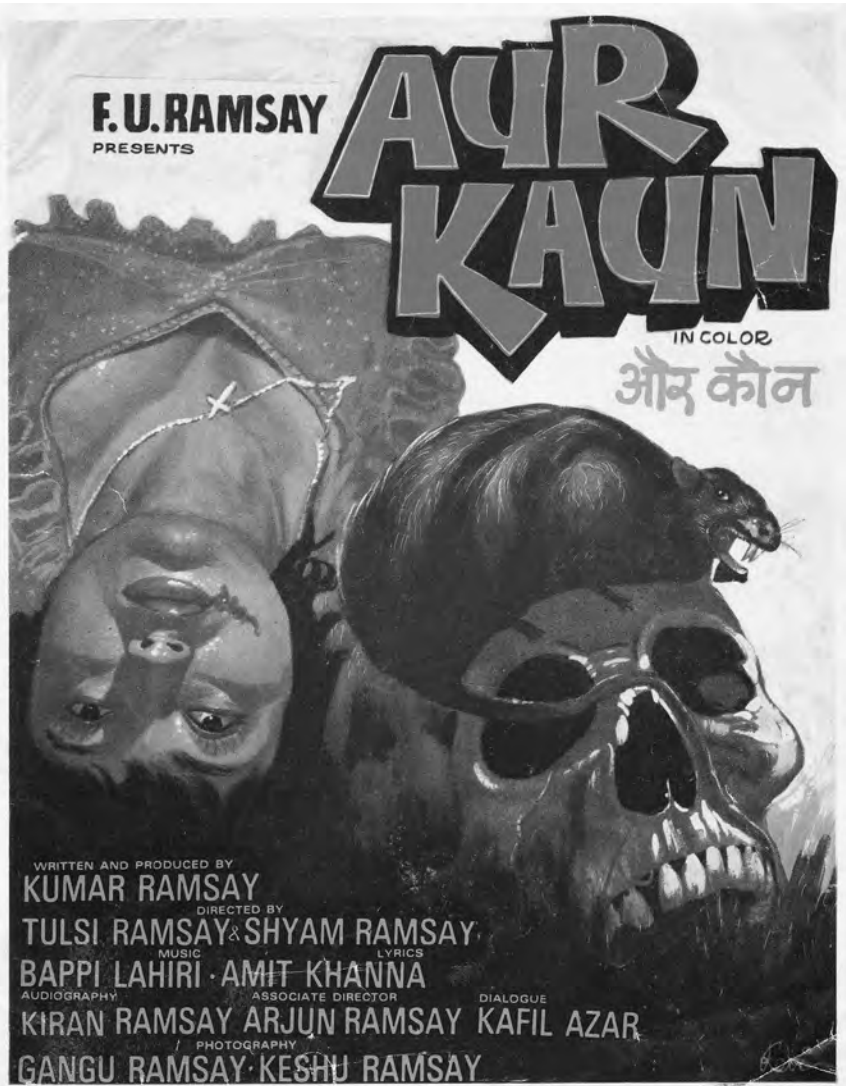


Figure 5. Song booklet for *Aur Kaun* (1979), an early entry in the Bombay horror cycle. Source: National Film Archive of India, Pune.

RELEASING ON 12TH JULY IN DELHI-U.P., BENGAL, RAJASTHAN & OVERSEAS

The image displays two movie posters stacked vertically. The top poster is for the film 'Cheekh', featuring a woman in a bikini being held inside a large, dark, open mouth with sharp teeth. The text 'SCREAM OF TERROR' is in the top left, and 'CHEEKH' is in a large, jagged font in the bottom right. Credits include 'PRODUCED BY K.M. BHAKRI', 'MUSIC NADEEM SHRAVAN', 'PRODUCTION A.P. BHAKRI', and 'DIRECTED BY MOHAN BHAKRI'. The bottom poster is for 'Khooni Mahal', showing a man in a dark, monstrous form holding a woman. The text 'OUR NEXT VENTURE NOW ON THE SETS IN 3-D' is at the top, followed by 'KHOONI MAHAL' in large, dripping letters. Credits include 'PRODUCED - DIRECTED BY MOHAN BHAKRI' and 'MUSIC NADEEM SHRAVAN'.

'CHEEKH', For Bombay Territory Contact : M. K. B. FILMS, 25/26, Mansaff Nagar, Flat No. 104, Versova Road, Andheri (West), Bombay-400 098. Phone : 576991.

Figure 6. "Our Next Venture Now on the Sets": horror booms in the mid-1980s.
Source: Trade Guide, 6 July 1985.