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Teaching Political Celebrity and Melodramatic Rhetoric in the Age of Trump through Hindi Cinema

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Teaching Political Celebrity and Melodramatic Rhetoric in the Age of Trump through Hindi Cinema

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Overview

Politics and celebrity have overlapped for hundreds of years, with the relationship intensifying since John F. Kennedy became America's first television president. That political figures are almost necessarily celebrities becomes clearer when we consider P. David Marshall's assertion that "the celebrity embodies the empowerment of the people to shape the public sphere symbolically" (2014, 7). Research shows voters feel empowered when they support candidates who share their values (see Street 2004; Marshall 2014; Kellner 2016); thus politicians must display carefully crafted personae through media outlets in order to become elected officials.

This lesson plan on political celebrity is part of a general education humanities course focused on the theme of celebrity society. The lesson asks students to consider how media shape politicians into celebrities through the use of melodramatic rhetoric as well as how doing so makes an individual politician's persona represent the presumed values of an electorate. Through examining the use of the melodramatic mode in both political campaigns and the Hindi political thriller *Rann* (2010, Ram Gopal Varma), students explore how the melodramatic rhetoric of political celebrities manipulates voters' emotions and justifies government actions.

This lesson is designed to take three days of class time without in-class screenings, or five days with the screenings. The first day introduces the relationship between politics and celebrity; students analyze politicians' use of celebrity tactics to secure support. On the second day, students discuss the role of affect in political celebrity by examining melodramatic rhetoric in political campaigns. Students also learn about elements of the melodramatic sensibility as they prepare to watch *Rann*. The first two days could be combined and condensed according to your needs. The students then view the film. If this viewing takes place in class, allow two days of a 75-minute class period to accommodate the film's 137-minute running time. The final day focuses on melodrama, affect, and political celebrity in *Rann*.

In today's polarized climate, it can be difficult to talk about the relationship between politics and celebrity without seeming to endorse or criticize particular candidates. *Rann* explores the consequences of melodramatic rhetoric and political celebrity removed from the polarized

American political context. Through this story, viewers see how media are implicated in the melodramatic narrative a corrupt candidate has crafted to convince the public that he is the hero. After viewing the film, students are primed to reflect on how its events connect to their experiences with U.S. mediated politics.

Rationale

The contemporary political climate necessitates that we equip our students to critically examine the ways in which politicians use media and celebrity for particular political ends. Douglas Kellner's *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* outlines the importance of understanding mediated political celebrity and alerting students to the role of melodrama and media representation in democracy. Kellner examines the role the media played in the 2000 and 2004 U.S. presidential elections and warns that "style became substance as both candidates endeavored to appear likable, friendly, and attractive to voters" (Kellner 2016, 3). Similarly, Mark Wheeler argues that "politicians have 'packaged' themselves as commodities to be sold to voters" (2013, 8-9), and the media distribute these commodities.

In an era when politicians' televised appearances inform how voters interpret their suitability for office, we must underscore that politicians are performers angling for our votes. As Marshall explains, celebrity politicians have an "affective function" which is clear in advertisements that appeal to emotions more than rational logic (2014, 204). Furthermore, politicians' performances are imbued with the melodramatic sensibility. As Christine Gledhill notes in her essay "Signs of Melodrama," stars embody the "clearly defined identit[ies]" (1991, 218) and moral positions of "good and evil which infus[e] human actions with ethical consequences and therefore with significance" (1991, 209). When politicians are treated like celebrities, they too become associated with "good and evil." Both John Street (2004, 447) and Andrew Tolson argue that the dominant project of media presentation is the appearance of authenticity (2001, 446). However, for political figures, this authenticity is packaged within "melodramatic political discourse" (1) that, as Elisabeth Anker argues, casts the nation as a victim and the government's agents as heroic actors in order to legitimate government power and military interventions (2014, 1-2). Because media and politicians use melodramatic rhetoric to cast candidates as protagonists and villains, and to justify government action as heroic, it becomes imperative for students to understand how politicians cast themselves as heroes protecting the innocent nation and the role that the media play in amplifying this narrative.

General Timeline

Students are prepared for thinking of celebrities as constructed products for public consumption in an earlier unit in the course. This lesson begins by interrogating the ways in which politicians, too, are shaped by publicists into products representing particular platforms. On Day 1, students read Darrel West's and John Orman's chapter "The Evolution of Celebrityhood," which summarizes how politics and celebrity intertwine, from candidates from a famous family to entertainers who become appealing political candidates. This chapter

primes students to discuss how fame can influence voter decisions and how politics operate similarly to show business.

On Day 2, students discuss P. David Marshall's chapter "The Embodiment of Affect in Political Culture" as an introduction to the influence of emotional and affective rhetoric on political decision-making. We then apply this reading to political campaigns by looking at a clip from *Primary*, the Obama HOPE poster, and two contemporary political ads from our area (one from each major party). This analysis of how campaigns play on our emotions segues into a discussion of how campaigns use the melodramatic sensibility to condense moral values in the figure of the political candidate. I introduce students to the characteristics of melodrama to prepare them to analyze both *Rann* and how melodramatic rhetoric informs politicians' and media outlets' strategies for attention and ratings.

Students then watch the 2010 Hindi-language political thriller melodrama *Rann* (see Days 3 and 4 in the Detailed Lesson Plan for a film summary). This film demonstrates that the use of melodrama in media coverage of politics is not just an American phenomenon but a condition of politics in the entertainment age.

The final day is divided into two parts. Students first analyze how melodramatic political rhetoric plays out in the film. Next, students complete an individual writing exercise asking them to consider the ways melodramatic political rhetoric might function in the contemporary American political context. Through analyzing melodrama in both films and political campaigns, students become alert to the ways politicians and media outlets similarly exploit their emotions, and, I hope, more critical analysts of melodramatic political rhetoric.

Detailed Lesson Plan

This lesson plan includes readings, discussion questions, and suggested clips designed to introduce the relationship between politics and celebrity, consider the role of affect and the style of melodrama, and finally discuss the film *Rann* as an example of the relationship between politics and the media and celebrity industries.

Note: I like to have a series of quotes and images on a PowerPoint to which I refer as they arise during the discussion, so when I have quotes indicated in the lesson plans with →, those are quotes that I have prepared on a slide and that I pull up when it makes sense to do so within our discussion. I indicate discussion questions with bullets.

Day 1: Politics, Celebrity, and Entertainment

Assigned Reading: Darrell West and John Orman. 2003. "The Evolution of Celebrityhood," *Celebrity Politics*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. 1-16. This chapter provides a brief overview of the relationship between celebrity and politics, charting the role radio and television appearances have played in elections over the past several decades.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify strategies of making and maintaining celebrity that also apply to politics
- Discuss Daniel Boorstin's concept of "the human pseudo-event"
- Discuss the benefits and concerns associated with politics as show business

During Class

I preface these discussions by saying that it is not necessary for any of us in the room to identify our political affiliations. We can use examples of things that politicians say and do as recorded and distributed via the media, but we do not need to get into the politics of a particular issue and debate representatives' stances on those issues.

We begin by revisiting Daniel Boorstin on the human pseudo-event, which we have discussed earlier in the semester.

→ Boorstin argues that "we have willingly been misled into believing that fame—well-knownness—is still a hallmark of greatness" (1978, 47).

- How does this apply in the case of politicians? Do we tend to automatically trust them or associate them with greatness? Why or why not?

I then show a clip from the documentary *Primary* (1960, dir. Robert Drew) comparing John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey as they used, respectively, television and telephone/radio to connect with voters. After viewing the clip, I ask:

- Which of these candidates seems more appealing? Why?
 - Students might discuss the optics of the two appearances, the differences in media, the personae of the candidates, etc.

Following on students' comments on what they noticed about these two different performances to secure votes, we discuss the relationship between politics and performing.

→ Ronald Reagan once said, "Politics is just like show business" (quoted in Postman 1987, 128).

- In what ways might politics be like show business?
 - Students comment on the ways that politicians' every moves are scrutinized, how they create an image, how they have to stay visible to maintain interest, how sometimes politicians will participate in publicity stunts, etc.

→ John Street summarizes some of this. He writes: "If they [celebrity politicians] are to be the objects of affection, to be 'attractive', then this intent informs the way in which they seek to communicate. It suggests that spindoctors are the equivalent of PR people in film and record companies, managing the image and appearance of their clients. It is about deciding what

interviews, with whom, when; it is about rationing the supply of images and information to coincide with the release of the latest record/policy initiative” (Street 244, 446).

→ I also share this quote from Douglas Kellner to get students thinking about this from a more theoretical position: “In the postmodern politics of promotion, candidates are packaged as commodities, marketed as a brand name, and sold as a bill of goods. In a presidential race, campaigns are dominated by image consultants, advertising mavens, spin doctors, and political operatives who concoct daily photo opportunities that make the candidates look virtuous, ‘messages’ that sound appealing, and ‘events’ that present the campaigns in an attractive format. Such campaigns are, of course, expensive and require tremendous budgets that make competing impossible for candidates without access to the megafortunes needed to run a media campaign. In turn, such megaspectacles render politicians beholden to those who cough up the millions of dollars to pay for the extravaganzas and for the vast apparatus of producers, spinners, and operatives to create and distribute them” (Kellner 2016, 10).

- Are these two quotes accurate? What aspects of them do you see in recent political campaigns? What aspects of these quotes do you question or disagree with, and why?
- Are there aspects of politics that are unlike show business?
 - Students sometimes say that they hope politicians have a certain level of expertise when it comes to things like foreign policy, or that they vote based on a candidate’s platform.
- What might be some of the drawbacks of treating politics like show business?

After students have had some time to think through this question, I share the following quote:

→ John Street voices two criticisms of the celebrity politician: “the first has to do with the excess attention given to image and appearance, and the second has to do with the irrelevance of the expertise which celebrity politicians possess” (2004, 441).

- Why are these concerns? Do you think these concerns are valid?
 - In response, it is worthwhile to point out that politicians have long made themselves into celebrities, and celebrities have long represented political causes—Leo Braudy points out that Abraham Lincoln was photographed more than once during the Civil War, and Hollywood stars Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and Charlie Chaplin all helped inform Americans about the need to become involved in World War I (see Braudy 1997, 556-557).
- This isn’t a new phenomenon—so why are we still concerned about it? What might be the ways in which the celebrity environment differs from these earlier contexts that would make the phenomenon of the celebrity politician more concerning?

Once we've discussed why we might be concerned about this overlap, I like to point out to students that the relationship between celebrity and politics might not be all bad.

- What might be some of the benefits of treating politics like show business?
 - If students seem stumped, ask them what really gets people excited about candidates. Some examples might be things like Beto O'Rourke stopping at What-a-Burger, or Donald Trump putting on the MAGA hat at a rally. Feeling that a candidate is likeable is often what gets voters to the polls, so although Darrell West and John Orman opine, "American citizens quickly became used to watching politics rather than participating in the system," resulting in low voter turnout (2003, 9), there is also a way in which watching politics can encourage citizens to take action and become voters. The phrase "mobilizing the base" is likely to come up, and we can think about what needs to happen to achieve this mobilization.

Finally, we consider what the entanglement of celebrity and politics implies for the ways that celebrity politicians fall out of favor, returning again to Boorstin.

→ Boorstin insists: "The very agency which first makes the celebrity in the long run inevitably destroys him. He will be destroyed, as he was made, by publicity" (1978, 63).

- What does this look like, in practice? Do you think this is something that is true of celebrity politicians?
 - The point here is to get students to think about why politicians are not elected or re-elected, such as, for example, how their appearance or intelligence might be attacked by their opponents' ads or *Saturday Night Live* sketches, as in the cases of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin.

I conclude this day by connecting students' observations in response to the last question to the idea of feeling that changes attitudes and motivates action, or affect. I tell them that they are going to read about how the way we feel about politicians plays a big role in political celebrity, and that we'll use that to think about how the relationship between politics, celebrity, and the media is represented in the film *Rann*. I ask students to begin thinking about why we should be aware of how politicians use the media to tell stories that play on our emotions as they read P. David Marshall's chapter for the next class.

Day 2: Celebrity, Affect, and Melodrama

Assigned Reading: P. David Marshall. 2014. "The Embodiment of Affect in Political Culture." *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 203-240. This chapter discusses the various ways political campaigns play on voters' emotions.

Learning Objectives:

- Understand how emotion and emotional rhetoric influence voters
- Identify how media, including film, play on our emotions
- Discuss why we should be aware of the role emotion plays in politics
- Identify basic characteristics of melodrama

Depending on the structure of the rest of your course, you may not need an entire day devoted to discussing melodrama as a filmic style and the role of emotion in celebrity politics. In this case, you could combine the relevant aspects of this day with Day 1.

Lecture/Discussion

I begin by pulling up an image of the “Celebrities ... They’re Just Like Us” spread from *US* magazine. (Any week will do; images can be found on Google images.)

We know that part of the appeal of celebrities is that they are “just like us,” as *US* magazine’s popular and long-running magazine spread suggests.

- Are our political representatives also “just like us”?
- What do politicians need to do to represent their constituents?
- Should they be like their constituents, or should they differ from their constituents? In what ways should they be similar and in what ways should they differ?

→ John Street writes: “When conventional politicians adopt the guise of the celebrity, when they pose as rock stars, do they appeal to images and identities that have no place in representative democratic politics, or are they establishing the very connections (between represented and representative) upon which ‘representation’ depends? Equally, when celebrities claim to speak for the people, when they criticise the decision to go to war, does their voice have any democratic legitimacy?” (Street 2004, 436).

- I ask students to respond to the questions in the Street quote. These questions lead students to discuss the ways in which political representation entails some of both.

→ Street insists that the political process is in part a performance: “Celebrity politics is a code for the performance of representations through the gestures and media available to those who wish to claim ‘representativeness’” (Street 2004, 445). If this is true, or even true sometimes in some cases, then we should learn how to read the performance, so that we know how we should interpret the performance.

To move us toward interpreting the performance, I share this quote from Douglas Kellner’s analysis of the 2000 and 2004 elections, pointing out that increasingly pollsters are not able to accurately predict the winners of elections.

→ “Academic pollsters tend to use rational-choice models and base their results on economic indicators and in-depth interviews; they seem, however, to downplay moral values, issues of character, the role of media spectacle, and the fluctuating events of the election campaigns. Indeed, academic pollsters argue that the electorate is basically fixed one or two months before the election. Arguably, however, U.S. politics is more volatile and unpredictable and swayed by the contingencies of media spectacle, as Election 2000 and its aftermath vividly demonstrated” (Kellner 2016, 6). Kellner goes on to discuss how *Saturday Night Live* made both Bush and Gore look bad, and how appearances on talk shows helped both candidates seem to be just a “regular guy” (or not).

- Is politics rational or emotional?
 - Students usually point out that it’s a little of both.
- How many of us really research a candidate before we go to the polling place? How many of us vote based on what we see in media appearances of the candidate, or based on name recognition?

→ P. David Marshall argues that “the citizen becomes reconfigured in political campaigns as a political consumer who, like any consumer, must make purchase choices among several different commodities” (2014, 205).

- What does this mean for the role of celebrity and celebritization within the political sphere?
 - The goal here is to get students to think about the ways that candidates advertise themselves. You can have a set of political ads from a recent election at the ready to share with students, asking them to identify the various rhetorical strategies used in the ads.

I then remind students of these aspects of their reading assignment, if they have not already brought them up.

→ There’s a lot of emotional work that goes into situating a candidate for election. P. David Marshall argues: “In their active attempts to contain the mass in various messages and images, political leadership campaigns can be thought of as intense efforts to connect to affective power so that it can be expressed through the individual candidate” (2014, 204). Affective power is harnessed in politics when candidates and journalists seek to evoke an emotional response in the electorate that will both change the way an individual feels about a candidate and motivate them to do something (e.g., vote for or against the candidate) as a response to that feeling.

→ Marshall tells us that “the political consultant constructs a frame for selling a political candidate to the electorate through the attachment of culturally embedded meaning to a particular issue or to the particular personality of a candidate. The cultural frames are the support structure for the establishment of the legitimacy of any candidate's claim to represent the mass public(s)” (2014, 212).

- So, political candidates have to become celebrities, because we have to know about them in order to vote for them. But, like celebrities, we don't know everything about them.
- Like other celebrities, who might consent to an interview with *People* magazine to reveal just enough information to keep the public interested, political candidates tell us carefully constructed stories about who they are and what they stand for.

To examine how this works in a particular campaign, we look at the red, white, and blue Obama "HOPE" campaign poster painted by Shepard Fairey and discuss its visual rhetoric and symbolic meaning.

- What does this image tell us about what culturally embedded meaning might be attached to this candidate?
- What in this image is meant to tell us that this candidate is a legitimate candidate for representing America?
- Marshall discusses "cultural hegemony" as "the symbolic structures that are in place or developed to provide a commonality among the various groups in the society" and are maintained through "symbolic structures" such as "the nation and nationhood, the family, folksongs, and culture" (2014, 213). What are some of the ways that this image might call on those symbolic structures?

This discussion transitions well into an introduction to melodrama as context for the film in the last 25 minutes of class, because the "HOPE" image makes the political personal.

→ Christine Gledhill argues, "the production of melodramatic identities involves excess of expression: hyperbolic emotions, extravagant gesture, high-flown sentiments, declamatory speech, spectacular settings and so on" (1991, 212).

- How did the "HOPE" campaign turn Obama into a melodramatic figure? What did it make him represent?
- One particularly useful connection to make, if recent political ads support it, is to ask students if they see any of these melodramatic elements in contemporary political ads (you can show a couple that are relevant to your area or to an upcoming election). Ask students: What emotions do the ads elicit and how? Call attention to what the candidate seems to be impassioned about.
- Why do you think politicians rely on emotion so much in their ads?

I then tell students that I'm going to introduce them to some basic elements of melodrama as a film style so that they have a foundation for what to pay attention to as they watch the film *Rann*. These basic elements of the melodramatic style are things we've already been looking at in these campaigns.

As John Mercer and Martin Shingler detail in their accessible work on the melodrama, the generic term derives from "'melos' (music) + drama," calling attention to the importance of music within the film (2005, 7). In the case of *Rann*, this music can at times be heavy-handed, but it's important to point out to students that the heavy-handed music is intentional. It is

there to encourage us to feel a particular way about the events we are seeing. I point out to the students some of the other characteristics of melodrama, such as:

- other unspoken elements that tell us about the characters and plot, such as significant objects in the mise-en-scene, obvious camera angles (often canted angles), costumes, and lighting;
- clear good guys and bad guys, with the protagonist often characterized as a victim;
- plot twists and sudden reversals of fortune;
- the ways in which these films locate larger ideological crises as personal crises to be resolved within the family—in other words, how these films often make the political personal, thereby acting as what Mercer and Shingler call an ideological “safety valve” without being really subversive (2005, 24).

A clip from a film melodrama will work to illustrate these concepts. Students respond well to *Imitation of Life* (1934, dir. John Stahl) and *Interstellar* (2014, dir. Christopher Nolan), but almost any clip that shows a sudden reveal of unexpected information followed by musically punctuated emotion will demonstrate these concepts sufficiently.

Marshall argues that “the political leader ... is generally painted as the father figure for the nation and its people” (2014, 217), which can lead us into a discussion of the context for *Rann*. I tell the students that in this film, strict patriarchal and familial roles of Indian culture clash with westernized values, such that the conflicts within the family that controls the news become the conflicts within the family of the nation. [As noted, I use this Hindi-language film as a way to discuss political issues in general without discussing specific candidates and situations. However, in order to prepare yourself to discuss the specifics of this style within the Hindi context, you might consider reading and/or assigning Meheli Sen’s chapter “‘It’s All About Your Parents’” on how the father/son relationship in Hindi cinema reflects changes in India’s political structure. Rachel Dwyer’s *Bollywood’s India* also provides a useful overview of contemporary Indian cinema, if you are interested in situating the film in this way.]

Days 3 and 4: View *Rann* (137-minute run time)

Summary of Rann: Idealistic reporter Purab Shastri (Riteish Deshmukh) lands a job as a journalist working with his idol, Vijay Malik (Amitabh Bachchan), the head of the channel India 24/7. Vijay sees his position as a lead anchor as a great responsibility to the viewing public. His son, Jai Malik (Sudeep), also works for India 24/7, but is more concerned with ratings and advertising revenue than with journalistic ethics. Jai’s brother-in-law, businessman Naveen Shankalya (Rajat Kapoor), and his colleague at India 24/7, Nalina Kashyap (Suchitra Krishnamoorthi), along with Amrish Kakkar (Mohnish Bahl), the head of the rival channel Headlines 24, prey on Jai’s desire for financial success and his questionable ethics. They convince Jai to create a fake news story implicating the current Prime Minister, Digvijay Hooda (K.K. Raina), in a terrorist bombing in order to increase candidate Mohan Pandey’s (Paresh Rawal) chances of winning the upcoming election. Several innocent bystanders end up dead as a result of Pandey’s and Shakalya’s maneuvering, but Purab Shastri uses his investigative skills to reveal the plot to Vijay Malik, who then has to choose between upholding his ethical responsibility to report on politics honestly and maintaining his son’s reputation.

The guided viewing handout (shared here in the ‘Teaching Materials’ section) asks students to try to identify some of the characteristics of melodrama as they watch the film to prepare them for our discussion with specific examples in mind.

It can be useful to point out to students the relationships between various characters during the first screening day, as they are often initially disoriented by trying to simultaneously read the subtitles and follow the plotline.

I show the film over two 75-minute class periods, and so stop about 10 minutes before the end of class on the first day and ask students to review what they have seen so far and to ask any questions.

Day 5: Celebrity Politics and the Media in *Rann*

Students will need to view *Rann* before this lesson.

Assignment: Guided Viewing Notes. When I show this film in class, I also assign a 500-word Viewing Response Paper that asks students to write about a theme that stood out to them in the film. This assignment encourages students process the film prior to the discussion.

Learning Objectives:

- Identify and analyze the film’s use of melodramatic elements
- Identify the role the media plays in the creation of political celebrity
- Consider the representation of political celebrity in *Rann* alongside political celebrity in the American context
- Discuss what is at stake when politicians and media outlets use melodramatic political rhetoric

Lecture/Discussion

We begin our discussion by looking closely at the film.

- Films often introduce the themes in the first scenes, in what is called the [exposition](#). What does this scene introduce as the themes of the film?
 - The film opens on a character flipping through various channels. It dramatizes the pervasive media presence—turning on the tv is the first thing people do in the morning. This raises questions about the media’s responsibility to those people.
 - There is no difference between coverage of terrorism and coverage of celebrity gossip in this opening footage.

The film’s clear protagonist and father figure, Vijay Malik, the head of India 24/7, frequently speaks to his viewers about the role journalism should play in the country.

- How do Vijay Malik and India 24/7 differ from these other news channels?

- He wants his audience to think, pushes them to do so—unlike, for example, the anchor Trivedi (Rajpal Yadav), who wants to start a channel with the motto “Don’t Think.”
- Vijay says, “media should serve the people”; his son Jai insists it’s a business.
- What is media’s responsibility to the people? Are the media just businesses? Are the two necessarily opposed, or is it possible to combine them (to both serve the people and succeed as a business)?

I then encourage the students to think about the role of melodrama in this film.

- What elements of the melodramatic sensibility do you see in the film?
 - Both the centrality of the family and the role of music tell us that we can classify this film generically as a melodrama.

I show a [clip of a tense exchange](#) between Jai and the newcomer Purab about the responsibility of the channel. I tell students that melodramatic excess is there to help us very clearly recognize the conflicts and values of the film.

- What do you notice as excessive here? What values and conflicts are being set up?
 - Melodrama is characterized as excessive—visually, sonically, and emotionally—so we see, for example, camera movement that reinforces the emotional register of a scene, or we have very obvious music, or we have lots of plot twists where everyone is interconnected. We also see Jai flipping a lighter open and closed throughout this and other scenes without lighting anything, and students love to riff on the metaphorical possibilities of that significant object.

That our characters fall so easily into types is also an aspect of melodrama—who is good and who is bad is pretty easy to recognize (rather than ambiguous or ambivalent). I ask students to briefly discuss who the protagonists and antagonists are in this film and to point out how we know.

Melodrama also transforms or conceives of all sociocultural struggles as struggles within the family.

- How does that happen in this film?
 - It’s a film about media responsibility and political ethics, but that conflict is only resolved within the Malik family. Vijay is in control in both the office and the home—but Naveen (Rajat Kapoor) and Jai are also continually testing him—business becomes part of the family dynamic.
- What is the place of values and ethics in media? Politics? Business? Family?
 - Vijay insists, “it is beyond media’s principles to speak for or against,” but Pandey tells him Vijay personally could speak “for,” because he is distinct from media—but is he? Can the newscaster ever not be the newscaster?

- The film suggests principles should be foremost—Purab is rewarded for his principled behavior—but principles can lead to serious consequences: because of his principles, Vijay loses his son.
- Villains are often more popular and often seem to get by with it—Naveen Shankalya, Pandey, and Nalini (Suchitra Krishnamoorthi) all get financial gain, and for a while, they seem to have the power to keep themselves beyond censure.

Once they have grasped how melodrama works in the film narrative, students are ready to think about how melodrama works in political rhetoric.

→ According to Elisabeth Anker, “the story of 9/11 is a melodrama. This depiction of the attacks adheres to the conventions of a genre form that portrays dramatic events through moral polarities of good and evil, overwhelmed victims, heightened affects of pain and suffering, grand gestures, astonishing feats of heroism, and the redemption of virtue” (2014, 2).

- In the film, how are the bomb blast and the politicians’ reactions to it framed in similarly melodramatic ways?
 - Pandey puts on a show of mourning after the bomb blast. He argues that his bill will protect the innocents of the nation from further victimization and blames Hooda’s inaction for their suffering.
 - Hooda reacts as an innocent person being accused of a heinous crime would be expected to react—indignantly—but that is used against him in [edited news footage](#).
 - This edited footage illustrates the ways terrorist events and the media reaction to them are constructed using what Elisabeth Anker calls “melodramatic political discourse” (2014, 1). His claims of innocence are edited to represent him as a villain.

→ Return to this quote from the discussion prior to the screening: “In their active attempts to contain the mass in various messages and images, political leadership campaigns can be thought of as intense efforts to connect to affective power so that it can be expressed through the individual candidate” (Marshall 2014, 204).

- In what ways might this film dramatize intense efforts to connect to affective power?
 - It is important to encourage students to consider the role that fear plays in elections here.
- What is the relationship between politics and celebrity? What role do the media play in politics? (We can talk about this as the film casts it and then discuss whether we think the film has accurately assessed that relationship.)
 - Vijay says he has lost a war (and that’s what the title means). What war has he lost? (Media buying and selling the nation; principles vs. profit; getting people to think critically and have better relations with one another vs. sensationalism and violence; uniting the country [Hindus vs. Muslims, politics for good vs. politics for evil].)

- If students don't make the connection on their own (they always have in my courses), you can push them to think about how the film's diegesis might be similar to our contemporary moment as well. E.g., how might melodramatic political rhetoric be part of contemporary U.S. campaigns? How might the stories told about immigration or terrorism be melodramatic? Who are the heroes and villains, and how are they cast in those roles?
- Knowing that politicians and media use melodramatic rhetoric to shape their stories, how can we better evaluate the political advertisements and news stories we see?

Conclude with a private connections writing exercise, which asks students to connect their observations to something in the American political climate. What do these readings and this film tell us about how we should respond to our contemporary celebrity politicians? Where do you see politicians using melodramatic rhetoric? What can you do to be more aware of the power of this rhetoric?

I like to collect these and gather relevant observations to begin the next lesson, so that students have an opportunity to express themselves but I have the option to collate the general points relevant to our discussion of celebrity, politics, and melodramatic rhetoric and to filter out potentially passionate rhetoric about a particular candidate.

Teaching Materials

Viewing Notes Handout

Rann (2010, Ram Gopal Varma)

Primary Characters:

Vijay Malik (Amitabh Bachchan) [runs India 24/7]

Nandita Sharma (Gul Panag)

Jai Malik (Sudeep)

Amrish Kakkar (Mohnish Bahl) [runs Headlines 24]

Anand Prakash Trivedi (Rajpal Yadav)

Nalina Kashyap (Suchitra Krishnamoorthi)

Priya Malik-Shankalya Simone Singh)

Digvijay Hooda (K.K. Raina) [Prime Minister]

Purab Shastri (Riteish Deshmukh)

Mohan Pandey (Paresh Rawal)

Yasmin (Neetu Chandra)

Naveen Shankalya (Rajat Kapoor)

Lata Malik (Nina Kulkarni)

Notes: Varma is one of India's "star directors," thought of as artists who can also make commercially viable films.

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions. It predates Christianity and Islam by centuries. Hinduism is a difficult religion for many Westerners to understand because it doesn't have a rigidly structured and prescribed set of beliefs. In many ways, Hinduism is inclusive toward other religions. It is often considered more of a way of life or a philosophical framework rather than 'religion' in the traditional sense. In a nutshell, Hinduism regards life as a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, with Karma acting as a guiding force.

Islam is a monotheistic religion based on the teachings of Muhammad, who lived between 570-632 BCE. Followers of Islam are called Muslims. Muslims worship the Supreme Being, Allah, and follow his revelations contained in their sacred text, the *Quran*.

The **Indian constitution** is secular, but people with very different ways of life—pantheistic/monotheistic; revering cows (Hindus)/eating cows—live side by side. Centuries ago, Muslims were invaders, but now both sides commit frequent acts of religious violence against the other.

TRP: target rating point; this is related to a share of advertising revenue.

Use the prompts below to help focus your note-taking. I will collect these and grade them as a short assignment. You may also use these prompts to write a response paper.

Pay attention to props, color, camera angles, editing, and sound (as much as you are able). Note anything that stands out to you here, and, afterward, attempt to interpret the meaning of at least one of these filmic components.

Referring to specifics from the film, explain what role the media plays in politics, and what role politics play in the media.

Who represents celebrity in the film? How is celebrity created and maintained?

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