Body Movements and Audience Emotion in Mira Nair's Filmic Bombay

Frederick Luis Aldama

Abstract: The study of emotional body language is beginning to show results that contribute to our understanding of the affective and aesthetic impact of films on their audiences. This article presents an analysis of Mira Nair's film *Salaam Bombay!* by turning to neurobiological findings on the emotions.

Keywords: blueprint, children, close up, gap filling, long shot, neurobiology

Almost by definition, cinema is movement. As advances in neuroscience show, movement itself is pregnant with emotion. The focus of this article is to explore the phenomenon of movement, bodies, and emotion in Mira Nair's 1988 film *Salaam Bombay!*

To respond well to how Nair's film—a blueprint of sorts—aims to move its (ideal) audience, this article explores how Nair shapes the telling of her story in ways that give rich texture to the particularities of place and time as well as appeal to audiences of all sorts.[1] In *Salaam Bombay!* Nair seeks to give expression to the impoverished world in which the young Bombay street dweller and *chai-wallah* ("tea-boy"), Krishna (Shafiq Syed), lives.

Throughout the article, I keep this blueprint mode of analysis at the forefront. In this way, and with a nonpartisan eye toward artistic creation of Indian cinema, I consider how *Salaam Bombay!* follows in the path of development and impulse that is cinematic—that uses the devices made available by world cinematic blueprints—and that does so to frame the movement of bodies in specific ways that determine how the audience will gap fill emotively and cognitively.[2] The result: the audience is ultimately led to feel awe for the technical mastery *and* a deep sadness for the plight of the characters.

The Story

Salaam Bombay! follows the harsh and violent coming of age of young and illiterate Krishna in what appears to be a contemporary Bombay (now Mumbai). Clothes worn by Krishna and his pals and those worn by US tourists seen briefly in the film, as well as certain objects like a tourist's camera or a radio-

cassette player in one of the brothel rooms, suggest this to be mid-1980s epoch. Left in the dust by the manager of a traveling circus somewhere in India's countryside, Krishna uses his few rupees saved to buy a one-way train ticket to Bombay. He finds work as a *chai-wallah,* saving his hard-earned rupees for the day when he can return home and pay off a 500-rupee debt owed to his family (he supposedly broke his brother's motor bike). The delivery of tea to different parts of the down-and-out neighborhood introduces him to Chillum (played by Raghubir Yadav) who deals drugs for the small-time pimp, Baba (Nana Patekar); inside the brothel where Baba lives, Krishna also meets Baba's young daughter Manju (Hansa Vithal); her mother, Baba's partner and prostitute, Rekha (Aneeta Kanwar); and Krishna's puppy-love interest, the young Solasaal known as "Sweet Sixteen" (Chandra Sharma). In this world, however, children are not allowed to be children. Sweet Sixteen is prostituted, Krishna's hard-earned rupees are stolen by Chillum who dies from an overdose, and Manju is placed in an orphanage. Krishna, after escaping a chiller (a juvenile detention center), returns to the brothel to save Sweet Sixteen, finding only the now daughterless Rekha struggling to leave Baba. Krishna kills Baba and leaves with Rekha; however, the mass of people in the streets celebrating the festival of Ganesh separate the two. The sequence ends with Krishna sitting in a side street, winding a string around a spin-top, crying. In such a world filled with the violent exploitation and oppression of the young and helpless, there is no place for love and care; there is a total absence of the nurturing environment within these social and economic conditions for the healthy development of children's cognitive and emotive systems.

Of course, we have seen similar stories told in films the world over, including Luis Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950) and Gerardo Tort's *De la calle/Streeters* (2001) set in Mexico; Hector Babenco's Sao Paolo/Rio de Janeiro–located *Pixote* (1981); Larry Clark's New York City–situated *Kids* (1995); Allison Anders's East Los Angeles–set *Mi Vida Loca* (1993); Menhaj Huda's London-located *Kidulthood* (2006); and Paris-based films of Mehdi Charef (*Le thé au harem d'Archimède,* 1985) and Mathieu Kassovitz (*La haine,* 1995). However, *Salaam Bombay!* is unique in some ways, including Nair's will to style that uses techniques of the trade to hold at arm's length that syrupy sentimentality that so readily sticks to social realist films that gravitate around the young and abandoned.

Nair nearly slipped down this slope of sentimentality when she first began to conceive the story. Her first impulse was to work "on a film about her childhood and maturity in India" (Muir 2006: 36). We have seen the fruits of her more autobiographical-inspired film with *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) and the result is not good. Not able to distance herself and camera narrator from her actual Punjabi family, she fills the extradiegetic sound with her niece's flavor-of-the-day favorite songs, in the mise-en-scène she always has at least one

family member, and she uses the aesthetically flimsy film technique of the home movie in a self-indulgent way. Her use of film's aural and visual channels to embrace a too close to home family sentimentality resulted in the narcissistic *Monsoon Wedding* distributed for audience consumption the world over.

Although there is a sliver of sentimentality in *Salaam Bombay!* it is not an earlier avatar of *Monsoon Wedding*. It was the strong hand of the screenplay writer, Sooni Taraporevala, who insisted Nair "look for material in a different direction" (Muir 2006: 36). The result was the making of a filmic blueprint that intensified reality in its use of lens, angle, lighting, editing, and sound score, while showing without sentiment the children's everyday struggles—and small pleasures—as seen without judgment from their level and worldview. To do so, every detail of the filmic blueprint had to be as deliberate and thought out as possible to ensure the accurate guiding of the audience's gap filling faculties and emotive and cognitive processes. On a shoestring budget and without the possibility of reviewing dailies, there had to be such a deliberateness to the making of the film. Nair and her team could not afford to not have everything planned, not only as evidenced in the careful story-boarding, but also in the making of wax models for each scene so all involved, including the Hindi-only speakers on the crew, could know precisely what was expected of each one.[3] It is this clear presence of Nair's will to style that allow for the careful integration of all the parts of the film that piece together into a non-sentimentalist aesthetic whole.

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Body Language and Emotion

Salaam Bombay! is a film—a moving photographic medium that uses motion in all facets of its construction of a narrative fiction blueprint. Along with the other ingredients that make up the total film experience, it is Nair's cinematographic decisions about how the characters' bodies move that help guide the filmgoer to "grasp the narrative in certain ways" (Bordwell 2007: 123). This motion is likely to trigger the filmgoer's emotion through the filmmaker's choice of the rhythm created into a sequence of differently timed shots, lens length, angles, and postproduction editing, but also by the motion of bodies within the frame. Indeed, the cognitive- and neurobio-scientific research shows important links between our visual and emotion systems. In our everyday activities, we are constantly appraising our environments as safe or unsafe based on what our visual (and aural) systems tell us about "bodily orientations and postures, hand gestures, and other things" (Hogan 2008: 198). One of the most subtle and complex of bodily areas that cue emotive responses is the face. The

face and its expressions cues us to identify a person that threatens or that is an ally, for instance. Moreover, as Patrick Colm Hogan writes, "we not only construe and recognize faces with great ease, we also experience congruent or complementary emotions when we see someone's face. Thus we may feel sorrow on seeing someone weep, and fear on seeing someone angry" (2008: 198).[4]

The face is the most subtlety expressive part of our body—with its massive amount of muscles and nerves, it can move in ways that no other part of the body can—and therefore allow us to convey an enormous range of expressions. It is not surprising that directors like Nair focus on the facial expression of character to move audiences. We see this in all variety of emotion-laden shots such as the look on Krishna's face as he gazes through the car window at Sweet Sixteen as she drives away to her first client (Figure 1).

The sharp contrasts of light (over exposing Krishna's face on the right side that casts shadows of varying darkness on the left side of his face) along with a look that reveals a range of emotion (deep concern to sad and desperate) is likely to move the audience. Importantly, Krishna's outstretched hands on the window together with the profile shot of Sweet Sixteen looking innocently and with naiveté at Krishna are likely to intensify the audience's emotional response to the tragedy that is soon to be her fate.

Figure 1. Krishna looking through the car window at Sweet Sixteen.

Figure 2. Krishna and Manju dancing.

   Although Nair's camera increasingly shows the children in such desperate states, there are moments especially in the early part of the film where she uses medium close and close-up shots to show an occasional glimmer of childhood joyfulness. We see this abundantly in a sequence when Manju and Krishna lip-synch and dance to "Mera naam Chin-Chin-chu" (Figure 2). And with great subtlety when Nair gives us a close up of Manju's face (Figure 3). This close up with the background completely faded, emphasizes two contrastive expressions: at the same time that we see age-inappropriate seriousness in her face—the angle of the head and a tiredness in the eyes, there is

Figure 3. Close up of Manju.

also that faint presence of the child—the slight smile and the glimmer in the eyes.
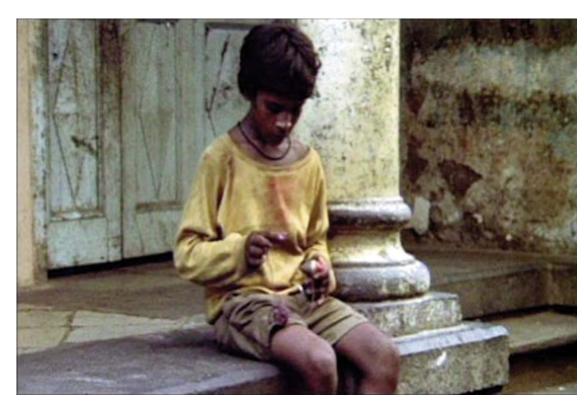
It is this seriousness that Nair increasingly picks up as the film unfolds until finally, once in the orphanage, there is a complete annihilation of the child (Figure 4). Though not in close up, the deliberate play of light not only enshrouds her body and face—a face that now weighs heavily with sadness as she looks downward—but blurs the lines that would readily identify the tricycle and instead emphasizes the shadows of the crisscrossed pattern of the bars on the window and the balustrade. The tricycle fades into the shadows of the barred window and balustrade and points to Manju's crushed childhood sensibility (Figure 4).

Nair punctuates her film with close ups on the faces of Krishna, Manju, and others in order to show the audience a range of her characters' emotions to likely trigger a similar range of emotions in the viewers.

The facial expression is only one of many parts of the body that can cue us to read and feel the emotion of the characters. As already suggested, body gesture, position, and movement also cue an emotional response in the audience. Indeed, film's motion forward—its splicing together seamlessly of still photographs that create the illusion of movement—offer the unique possibility of complicating and infusing great nuance to emotions felt by Nair's characters. We see this at play in the medium shot of Manju sitting up against the wall moving her head downward; while the mise-en-scène asks that we read

Figure 4. Manju in the orphanage.

*Figure 5. Krishna
sitting on the porch.*

this as a loss of childhood, it is her body movement that allows us to see the transition from one emotion to another that ends in total despair.

In perhaps the most emotionally moving scene of the film, we see this use of body motion to cue and trigger a similar range of emotions in the audience in an even more intensified manner. Nair ends *Salaam Bombay!* with the camera narrator slowly moving from a medium long shot to a close up of Krishna. Although this is a single shot, there is an important camera movement. The camera pans slightly to give a sense of the physical space then pauses on Krishna sitting on the concrete porch (Figure 5). Then the camera dolly tracks toward Krishna. He begins to cry and slowly wind the string around his toy spin-top—an object that we associate with childhood; his head tilts upward a little as his hands move deliberately and automatically as an attempt to calm and comfort. The camera pauses its movement toward Krishna with a final close up: he stops crying, looks over to the right, and we see his eyes widen (Figure 6). The diegetic sound (the drums and shrill trumpets of the festival of Ganesh) subside, an extradiegetic sitar sound fills the aural channel, and then silence. Then credits roll. Through the combination of medium long shot and close up, we see Krishna morph from sorrowful, desperate child into the mature, hardened adult—all in a matter of seconds.

Indeed, neurobiological findings show that the body's movements taken as a whole can be a powerful way to express, among other things, uncon-

Figure 6. Close up of Krishna.

flicted emotions.[5] This is consonant with findings from older studies concerning the reception of emotional signals by the limbic system and the cortex and neocortex. More specific, today we understand better how the emotion system's stimuli or signals pass through the human brain's amygdalohippocampal system where the signals have their first impact and leave their first trace, then pass to the left peri-Sylvian region where language is formulated, then on to the frontal cortices and their subcortical connection where the distinction between real and fictional is made. Meanwhile, the stimulus has already gone to the amygdalohippocampal system and we have already flinched, perspired, and continue to do so.[6]

According to the research of Beatrice de Gelder, our emotion system is triggered by multisensory inputs (sight, taste, smell, touch) and is itself multidimensional; the emotion system is at once simple and quick acting (flight/fright) and also a highly cognitive processes that can influence action and perception. More specific, within the emotion system (limbic system) it is the amygdala that has been identified as key area for the network of emotional brain structures. It is responsible for decoding sight, sound, smell, touch signals and to determine their "affective relevance" as well as initiating "adaptive behaviors via its connections to the motor systems" (de Gelder 2006: 243). Moreover, the amygdala orchestrates two emotional circuits in response to emotional body language (EBL): the automatic reflex-like circuit (subcortical) responsible for fright/flight responses and a controlled circuit (cortex) in the

service of recognition and deliberation; this is what tells us we do not have to run or to try to save the children when we watch a film. As de Gelder writes, "in higher organisms, both systems cooperate in decoding EBL signals and monitoring behavior following an emotional signal provided by EBL" (246–47). These two systems are connected to certain executive functions that make the final decision to run or not when watching a film or when someone approaches us in an alley way. Hence,

> Both systems have connection with brain structures that have a role in connecting awareness of bodily states to decision making. The two input systems also have numerous interconnections, as well as connections with the body awareness system, but can function relatively autonomously. And this relative autonomy guarantees that an alerting event signaled in the subcortical pathway elicits a rapid reflex-like reaction in the absence of detailed stimulus processing and is not systematically overruled by concurrently available positive information. (de Gelder 2006: 247)

Moreover, although EBL is less expressive and less ambiguous than the face, it provides "the emotion as well as the associated action" (de Gelder 2006: 248). That is, a facial emotion expressing fright can be ambiguous, but the emotional body language necessarily exhibits the co-presence of the emotion and the action connected to the emotion, thus creating a "less ambiguous signal and a more direct call for attention in the observer" (248).

This insight helps us understand how our brain receives the signals in watching a film like *Salaam Bombay!* It helps us understand the choice made by Nair to use a long shot, medium shot, or a close up. Of course, Nair is not thinking of de Gelder's research; she is doing this intuitively imagining herself in the audience. When we have a visual of the face or a visual of the whole body we tend to make that whole body become meaningful and expressive through its movements—and the choice of camera lens affects how the audience's brain receives the facial expression and the emotional body language differently and to different effect. Thus, it is not surprising that in the final scene of *Salaam Bombay!* Nair chooses to use a medium shot to convey straightforward emotion (emotional body language) that tracks in to a close up to convey Krishna's more nuanced shift from sorrow and grief to a series of conflicting emotions that finally settle into a hardened despondence. When Krishna takes the spin-top out of his pocket, it is his whole body that is still presented on screen, and his bodily movements are still expressing his emotions—the result of his flight from the killing of Baba and being separated from Rekha. From the whole body, we increasingly start focusing on the face. The body has already told us all it could in terms of motion conveying emotions, and now it is the face that takes over.

This final shot is quite extraordinary. Nair, together with her director of photography Sandi Sissel and an extraordinary nonprofessional child actor Shafiq Syed, deliver a most compelling filmic experience. Using both medium (and medium close and medium long) and close up shots to capture the complex moment in which the audience sees and feels how sadness, desperation, and grief over having had to kill a man changes into a hardened, bitter acceptance of the harsh facts of this young boy's life. Almost eerily, the face morphs from that of a child to that of an adult right before our eyes and in a matter of seconds.

Final Words on Movements That Matter

In *Salaam Bombay!* Nair uses her motion photography skills to frame specific facial expressions and body movements that cue emotional responses in the audience. Of course, Nair and her director of photography intensify the filmgoer's emotional response in the choice of camera lens, angle of shot, length of shot, movement of camera, lighting (rim-, luminous-, or back-lighting, for instance[7]), play of shadows, color contrasts and saffron look, editing, costuming, and sound (diegetic and extradiegetic "natural" or composed).[8] Nair and her filmmaking team select to use certain film devices to trigger in specific ways our body-movement and face-expression *responding* faculties: Manju's sudden obliteration of her childhood and Krishna's instant transformation into a man-child.

Nair's choices of filmic device, setting, and character make for a complete film viewing experience that includes the emotional response to body movements and facial expressions. However, Nair's choices also delimit radically the audience's bigger sense of the *where* and *when* of the story. The film shows Krishna's movement in and around the brothel and adjacent train station as well as places in the surrounding environs such as the chiller room and a wedding party marquee, but we are never given a sense of the *where* this is in the city as a whole; we are never given a sense of the *where* of the other socio-economic walks of life that make up the city. This microscopic view of a limited range of happenings in a very localized, seemingly isolated place in Bombay fits well with the film's point of view: that of Krishna and his rather restricted movement to a few streets. The net effect is that Krishna and his experiences are atomized; the conditions of his existence are excised from the socio-historical tissue of Bombay specifically, and the world in general.

Certainly, Nair's careful choice of filmic device such as mise-en-scène, lighting, camera lens, and actor movements appeal to the emotional inclinations of viewers, but very much as situated from the point of view and experiential location of Manju and Krishna. Had Nair and her team not held the children's plight at arm's length and simply considered it as matter-of-fact as the children do, the film would have slipped into the sentimental. This is to be ap-

plauded. However, one has to wonder if such absenting of this childhood experience in a ghetto out of time and place (in the larger sense) does not reveal something else: Where is that mid-1980s Bombay's other walks of life like the middle and upper classes who exploit and oppress workers and the urban poor? How are those like Baba, Rekha, Manju, Krishna, and Chillum tied to capitalism more generally? This brings to mind a statement Nair (Harvard-educated daughter of a prominent Punjabi family) made in an interview with *Cineaste:* that living in the streets to make *Salaam Bombay!* allowed her to feel "the grit of it" and to get "completely fired up by that" (Badt 2004: 12). Perhaps getting fired up lent itself to the making of a film—and the feeling we get from all its parts in our assembling of an "implied director" that detaches Krishna from a larger reality—with a slumming-it worldview.

Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* is the rich texturing of a site of out-of-time-and-space violent oppression and exploitation of children. Perhaps this is why Hamid Naficy is critical of the way the film "performs poverty" as well as of the media's overzealous applauding of Nair's depiction of "society's poverty and marginalia" (Naficy 2001: 272). Nair is not alone here. As Ashis Nandy points out in his introduction to *Secret Politics of Our Desires,* there is a long tradition of Indian popular cinema aestheticizing poverty. Indian cinema that goes slumming is very popular, according to Nandy. It appeals to an ambitious lower middle class audience grappling for a middle class standing but that "lives with the fear of slipping into a slum or never getting out of it" (Nandy 1998: 5). Nandy concludes, "The slum in India is not so much the enforced abode of the industrial proletariat or the urban poor, atomized and massified. It is an entity that territorializes the transition from the village to the city, from the East to the West, and from the popular-as-the-folk to the popular-as-the-massified. The slum is where the margins of lower-middle-class consciousness are finally defined" (6).

Moreover, such films that slum-it (urban or rural) in India offer the lower middle class audience the *haute bourgeoisie* lens through which they can see and experience the slum—from a seemingly safe upper middle class and upper class distance. I wonder if *Salaam Bombay!* too slips into this trap by showing life at the outer extreme margins of the social—but safely out of time and place. *Salaam Bombay!* could be, after all, the same story of a Krishna in the 1920s or 1980s without having to change anything, including the setting and events. Perhaps, its appeal, then, is that the poverty, violence, and oppression experienced by its children is safely dislodged from the very world audiences *all* inhabit.

Reviewers of *Salaam Bombay!* praised it variously as "disturbing," "depressing," and "incredibly moving." (see Kauffmann 1988; Sawahata 1989; Travers 1988). As these reviewers suggest, Nair successfully uses the devices of film to frame character motion to appeal to the emotions of its audience in a

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subtle and unsentimental fashion. Nair's film provides enough detail of the story and character particulars while at the same time loosely directing the way the audience fills in gaps emotionally and cognitively. However, films are likely to achieve emotional success when they show us bodies in motion in ways that provoke our subcortical responses. Of these, the best are those that situate those bodies in a particular time and place, films that move the filmgoer to feel for the characters and their actions in this one world in which we all exist.

Frederick Luis Aldama is Arts and Humanities Distinguished Professor of English at the Ohio State University where he uses the tools of narrative theory and advances in the cognitive and neurobiological sciences in his teaching and scholarship on Latino and postcolonial literature, art, music, film, and comic books.

Notes

[1] In *Poetics of Cinema* David Bordwell identifies how filmmakers mobilize "features of theme and subject, style, and large-scale form . . . to guide the spectator's overarching understanding of the material" (2007: 50).

[2] The filmmaker provides the blueprint, but, of course, this means that there are gaps to be filled by the audience. If it were not so, then it would no longer be a blueprint, but a one-to-one mapping of the whole territory. In *Poetics of Cinema* Bordwell summarizes this process: "In grasping narrative form, for instance, the spectator contributes a lot—picking up the cues planted by the filmmakers, as well as inferring, extrapolating, filling in gaps, and the like" (2007: 50).

[3] The choice, for instance, of a long lens was deliberate; however, as Nair points out, what it ended up capturing in the deep background was accidental. So within the very planned out, there is also the presence of the unexpected and unplanned that can sometimes enhance the film's overall aesthetic appeal and value.

[4] Hogan explains in more detail this faculty for reading and responding to facial expressions:

> The face provides us with crucial information about a person's identity, attention, and attitude. Facial information is often critical for assessing another person's likely status as a threat (e.g., an enemy in conflict) or opportunity (e.g., an ally in conflict). For this reason, our visual system is biased against simplicity in the case of data that bear on faces, particularly as those faces express emotions. Indeed, it is biased against simplicity in construing visual information as a face—a fact that is obvious from ordinary experience, where we are likely to see faces in almost anything that has even vaguest face-like features (e.g., the moon). This sensitivity to faces has a range of consequences. For example, we not only construe and recognize faces with great ease, we also experience congruent or complementary emotions when we see someone's face. (Hogan 2008:198)

See also Murray Smith's *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion*, and *the Cinema* (1995) and Jacques Aumont's (2007) work on the aesthetics of the cinematic face.

[5] We see this use of the body movement as expressive of straightforward emotion in action films where directors typically use the long and medium shot in order to show the hero's total body movement. If the hero's movements were in close up, the shot would ineffectively convey the straightforward emotion of, say, confidence as the hero jumps from, say, one building to another. A case in point: the long and medium long shots used by Ang Lee to show the movement of bodies in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). The camera lens allows Lee to show in a deliberate way and with a certain distance the movement of the balletic martial arts battle atop the bamboo trees, moving the audience to feel a range of simple and strong emotions.

[6] Both kinds of emotion-signals or emotion-information follow the same neurologic circuits from the brain's emotional system to its cognition system and then diverge in their effects when the latter determines what kind of response is warranted; that is, to act or react when the information is identified as pertaining to real life and to stop or not initiate action when the information is identified as pertaining to make-belief or fiction. Our capacity for fiction-elicited emotions is a key ingredient in both our engagement and creation of verbal, aural, and visual art.

[6] In *Understanding Indian Movies,* Patrick Hogan (2008) identifies how the use of rim lighting (that sharpens boundaries between bodies), luminous lighting (that diffuses boundaries), and back lighting (that suggests danger or a threat) can work in interesting

patterns to create contrastive emotions in a film like Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996). So instead of the back lighting used during the intimate scene between Radha and Sita triggering the fear emotion, it diffuses this partly "through its association with emotional memories of intimacy, the lighting fosters our alignment with the lovers, our sense of sharing their experiences and feelings" (Hogan 2008: 247).

[7] Mira Nair's director of photography Sandi Sissel mentions in her commentary on the making of *Salaam Bombay!* that the developing lab in Madras had no experience processing Kodak film and destroyed the film's blue layer. Sissel had to build the blue color back into the film in the postproduction stage; this process added the film's saffron look and its corresponding warm-like mood. Another serendipitous moment!

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