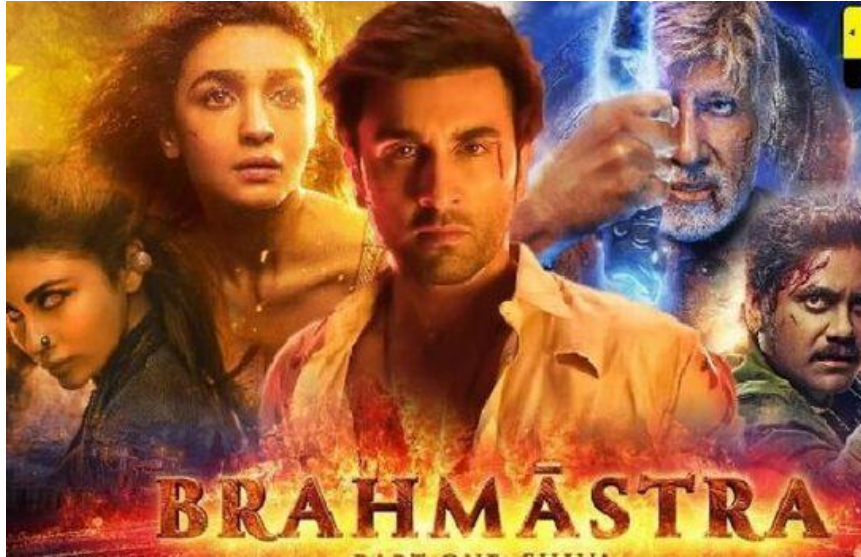


Critique

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Unveiling the Symptoms: The Last Weapon

Danseuse? A classical dancer with present-day flavour? Yes, danseuse!

Whenever I see Aishwarya Rai on screen, she appears more like a dancer than an actor or supermodel. She acts like a creeper swaying in the wind in front of the camera, especially alone in the frame. She lacks the necessary control over her actions, particularly over her hands. From her first movie *Iruvar* (1997), which established her as the epitome of absolute beauty, to her most recent one, *Fanney Khan* (2018), we have witnessed Rai's easily detectable manners. This could be the weakness of an artist who has refused to grow. Even ace directors like Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Mani Ratnam could not change her structured impulsion. Ratnam's much-acclaimed *Raavan* (2010) could be a prominent example of the compulsive obsession with an actor's body.

In such circumstances, it would be natural to ask whether the director has not been able to remove the actor's compulsion or if he has bowed down to the star power of the actor. Or has the director purposefully chosen to ignore these flaws? In such case, he gives birth to a flat actor or a megalomaniac narcissist!

French Philosopher and literary critic Michel Foucault stated: The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and organism dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. As an analysis of descent, Genealogy is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body imprinted by history and the processes of history's destruction of the body.

We tend to like their physique, manners, and behaviour when we admire someone. We remember the trifles well. If that person happens to be a public figure, or celebrity, especially a movie actor, we fall for their overall appearance. Unknowingly, their body language and mannerisms get imprinted in our subconscious minds. Therefore, tracking their poor performance and lack of self-awareness on and off-screen becomes easy.

Apart from being a member of a distinguished family of Indian cinema, actor Ranbir Kapoor has a dignified place on the screen. Like his father, Rishi Kapoor, he has a spontaneous and flamboyant presence in front of the camera. He has a brilliant pace and an intense look similar to his mother, Neetu Singh. However,

from time to time, we can trace a contour of Shammi Kapoor in him.

Rishi Kapoor was an outspoken persona. When beef was banned in Maharashtra (2015), he said: "I am a beef-eating Hindu. Does this make me less religious than someone who does not eat beef?"

Ranbir doesn't possess his father's characteristic straightforwardness. He is a bit soundless. But his reluctance is sometimes reflected in his expressions. Amitabh Bachchan and Ranbir Kapoor have several scenes together in the recently released film *Brahmastra* (2022). Amitabh delivers the dialogues, written in *shuddh* Hindi and drenched in period film flavor, with perfect pronunciation. In response, the conversations that come from Ranbir are not in tune; they are half-baked and Hinglish in structure. At such a point, the actor's body language exhibits sarcasm and displeasure.

Dialogue does not become accomplished with just the writer composing it and the actor performing. It is complete, conversant, and memorable only when it represents the character and the environment. It can create a harmonious mood with the scenes' colors, sounds, lines, and characters. Without such balance—"Bakhuda Hum Mohabbat Ke Dushman Nahi, Apne Usulon Ke Ghulam Hai" (*Mughal-e-Azam*, 1960) to "Rishhte Mein To Hum Tumhare Baap Lagte Hai" (*Shahenshah*, 1988) or "Mogambo Khush Hua" (*Mr India*, 1987), -this journey would not have been so pleasant and wonderful.

It's hard to believe that director Ayaan Mukherjee has nothing to say on his own. Ayaan Mukherjee is known for his work on *Wake-up Sid* (2009). We know him for telling Mumbaikar stories, creating photographic scenes of blue beaches and mountains, and his dreamlike romantic moments. He is also known for portraying Ranbir Kapoor as his alter ego—a youthful character accustomed to Bollywood *thumkas* and thrills but dissociated and a loner of his kind.

It took Mukherjee's *Brahmastra* more than seven years to complete. The film started shooting in 2018 and was rumoured to be released in 2021. Despite having hefty producers like Dharma Productions and Apurba Mehta, the film's release was repeatedly delayed due to financial reasons.

Certain scenes shot in Varanasi in March 2022 were later added to the film.

The much-anticipated film finally hit theatres in September. *Brahmastra* is just a rambling orchestra of the record-setting fantasy action genre, like the *Harry Potter*, *X-Men*, and *Avengers* series. Although there are a few Ayaan Mukherjee-style scenes, in the beginning, *Brahmastra* is entirely Karan Johar's film, starring his cringey obsession, Alia Bhatt.

After *Udta Punjab* (2016), it was expected that Alia Bhatt had all the calibre to become the top actress in Bollywood. In a recent episode of producer-director Karan Johar's glamour show 'Coffee with Karan' in July, Alia, the newly married actress, said that Ranbir Kapoor is very familiar with the traditional values. While performing the religious rituals, he is a strict disciplinarian too.

Alia's comment came suddenly, somewhat irrelevantly, in the middle of other conversations on the show. A few months ago, probably after the wedding of Ranbir and Alia in April, social media was in turmoil against *Brahmastra*. There was a virtual war between the film's producers and actors. Concoction for this war may have been going on for some time. But it began in practice with the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput in June 2020, and Bollywood was described as a Mafia-run industry, Hindu-phobic, and an empire of nepotism. Confused and lazy netizens in the shadow of the lockdown did not even realise when they jumped into the Bollywood vs India battle looking for justice for Sushant. When did they become furcated too?

After the Coronavirus lockdown and the increasing Bollywood animosity that has developed in its wake, the movie halls remained empty. OTT quickly became the most desired product. But each film, on or off, brought with it needless controversy and hazardous judgement. Despite such a disastrous encirclement, the one whose films kept coming, the products and endorsements kept going, who was visible everywhere, is none but Alia Bhatt. Alia Bhatt's is the only brand on which the century's hardships have not left a scratch. Perhaps her public relations team is very affluent.

When he proposed the idea, the inventor of the selfie probably had no idea what he was getting into. Likewise, while blessing Bhasmasura, Lord Shiva had no idea that one day he would have to run at the rate of a devotee. Whatever the enchantment of selfies is, it is making people more narcissistic and depressed; it has created a new and grave labyrinth in terms of acting, which can be termed the Selfie syndrome. Some recent films and series show that most actresses have similar make-up and styling. The facial expressions of the heroines are the same in every film and in every character, which is a little indigestible. Weird to some extent too. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) is a clear example of this. In this lavish, much-hyped film, the camera was focused entirely on the lead character, Alia -in her perfect looks, body, jewellery, and designer chappals that scraped the ground but with the slightest stain! Barely the film featured any side view of the actress. Apart from Gangubai, the camera was focused on Alia's face like an enchanted snake in the southern joy *RRR* (2022), the OTT release *Darlings* (2022), and even in her new advertisements, whose purpose was very likely to establish her as the utmost bankable beauty of the subcontinent.

It is believed that if the actor is not of high calibre, he is placed in a long or mid shot, let alone close-up or zoom-in! In the 1960s and 70s, long before today's high-tech filmmaking, two young Indian actors astounded the cinematographers and producers. They were none other than Dilip Kumar and Amitabh Bachchan. Dilip Saab possessed incredible control over his eyes and voice, and Bachchan's unique body language could carry modern and traditional India together. The films that elevated them to the status of great actors feature some powerful zoom and close-up shots. When we look at the films of other compelling and successful actors worldwide, we see that the camera is not following them alone in any film. The audience does not remember the film as a good experience.

Floating rumours, social media news, viral memes—all in all, what they have been trying to prove for months is that Bollywood's final destruction

is right around the corner. An industry run by 'Khans' that does not promote Indian culture and values and imports foreign or fringe ways of life has ended! Since Ayaan Mukherjee belongs to Karan Johar's gang and Ranbir Kapoor has also earned the star image only by descent, the failure of their much-anticipated films marks the shutting down of Bollywood!

However, despite the trolls and controversy, the movie halls screening *Brahmastra* seemed packed. But the unambiguous opinion would be that *Brahmastra*, the film reclining on Amitabh Bachchan and Ranbir Kapoor's star power, has only two characters—VFX and Alia; Alia's hands, feet, arms, hard-earned newly built neck, and constantly smiling pout selfie face! Though the film was much fostered as a picture of the miraculous powers in Hindu mythology, it was unfound.

The question is, why did Ayaan release such a flawed film after such extensive planning? *Brahmastra's* poor editing, untied dialogues, a visible age difference between the actors between the scenes, and inappropriate indoor shooting rank the film as a complete instance of compromise.

Each and everyone, organic or inorganic, has a specific life span. The performers are no exception. There is only one among the myriad who remains indelible. But to be an august one, you don't need a Public Relations agency. The background of this wounded lifeline of the Indian film industry is somewhat like the Selfie syndrome—narcissistic, hypocritical, and their attitude is far from humane reality.

So, could we say that *Brahmastra* marked the end of Bollywood?

And we—you, me, you as well—witnessed the apocalypse of the world's largest film industry?

In a recent interview, renowned director R Balki stated, “Will the industry end if a few films come up short? Both good and bad times will come and go.”

And We, the ardent film buffs and co-fighters of this greater universe called humankind, believe that brighter days are on their way.