

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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Viceroy's House (dir. Gurinder Chadha, 2017)

On Camera

Jeet Kumar, Hindu servant: Manish Dayal: *90210* (TV 11-12), *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (14)
Aalia Noor, Muslim translator: Huma Qureshi: Actress and model, *Gangs of Wasseypur* (12)
Dickie Mountbatten, viceroy: Hugh Bonneville: *Iris* (01); *Downton Abbey* (10-15)
Edwina Mountbatten, his wife: Gillian Anderson: *The X Files* (93-18); *The House of Mirth* (00)
Pamela Mountbatten, daughter: Lily Travers: *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (14)
Ali, Aalia's blind father: Om Puri: Eminent veteran of 300 Indian, US, and UK films
Asif, Aalia's fiancé: Arunoday Singh: rising star in India, with 15 other film credits
Duleep Singh, Sikh servant: Jaz Deol: rising star in the UK; two dozen film and TV credits
Muhammad Jinnah: Denzil Smith: *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (12)
Jawaharlal Nehru: Tanveer Ghani: Two prior movies with Gurinder Chadha
Mahatma Gandhi: Neeraj Kabi: Coming to CIFF in *In the Shadows* (17)
"Pug" Hastings, chief of staff: Michael Gambon: Dumbledore! Also *Victoria & Abdul* (17)
Cyril Radcliffe, border-drawer: Simon Callow: Eulogized in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (94)

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Gurinder Chadha: Has specialized in comedies up to this point in her career
Cinematography: Ben Smithard: *Belle* (13), *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (15)
Original Score: A.R. Rahman: Oscar winner for *Slumdog Millionaire* (08); 165 other credits
Art Direction: Laurence Dorman: a specialist in low-budget British independent films
Costume Design: Keith Madden: upcoming Ian McEwan adaptation *On Chesil Beach* (17)
Film Editing: Valerio Bonelli: *Philomena* (13), *Florence Foster Jenkins* (16)
Victoria Boydell: *Belle* (13), *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (17), at CIFF

Also directed by Gurinder Chadha ...

Bhaji on the Beach (1993) – Comedy about Indian women taking a vacation at the English seaside
What's Cooking? (2000) – Follows families of four ethnicities celebrating Thanksgiving in L.A.
Bend It Like Beckham (2002) – Global smash about teenaged Sikh girl who wants to play soccer
Bride & Prejudice (2004) – Update of Jane Austen blending Bollywood and Hollywood styles
It's a Wonderful Afterlife (2010) – Comedy about Indian woman murdering her daughter's exes

Other films you might try if *Viceroy's House* interested you ...

Chinnamul (1950) – The first Indian film made about the Partition, about dislocated farmers in what is now Bangladesh; achieved wide distribution outside India, especially in Russia

Scorching Winds / Garam Hawa (1974) –Hindi drama, about a Muslim family stuck in northern India after Partition; competed at the Cannes Film Festival, and was submitted for Oscars

Gandhi (1982) – Three-hour biopic about Mahatma Gandhi (Ben Kingsley), from his student days through the Partition, and ending with his assassination soon afterward; won multiple Oscars

Earth (1998) – Part of a trilogy with *Fire* (1996) and *Water* (2005), all by the same director, Deepa Mehta, an Indian-Canadian director; a rich family's beautiful nanny (Nandita Das) is courted by Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh men in her village, until violence breaks out post-Partition; the filming was so controversial that the sets were repeatedly bombed and theaters threatened

The Partition story is rarely told in English-speaking cinema but is a frequent subject of films made all over India, in a variety of languages, often constructed as star-crossed love stories, and always walking fine lines in depicting the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh characters

Facts about *Viceroy's House* you may appreciate...

Gurinder Chadha's grandfather was working in Kenya while his wife raised their four children in what is now Pakistan. That is why, as the coda tells us, she had to travel alone to India after Partition took place. Chadha's own family moved to London when she was two years old. She never visited Pakistan until 2005, as part of a TV documentary about tracing family trees.

Chadha began developing *Viceroy's House* with her husband and co-writer Paul Mayeda Berges in 2011, long before Brexit or Trump, and well before the media was covering the global refugee crisis as such. The film just happens to be coming out as the themes of nationalist prejudice and massive human migrations are so timely—and coincides with Partition's 70th anniversary.

One of the two books Chadha and Berges used for their screenplay, Narendra Singh Sarila's *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition* (2006), was one of the first accounts to uncover the geopolitical strategy England was implementing in forcing Partition. Before then, it was often taught in schools and in media as a necessary solution to increasing tensions among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs (as several characters in the film also insist).

Despite a desire for period realism, Chadha asked her costumer to make the clothes less obviously "Hindu," "Sikh," or "Muslim" in style, so that these differences would not be so glaring to the casual observer, and the senseless of the conflicts sewed among them could be emphasized.

Gillian Anderson relied heavily on Lady Edwina Mountbatten's memoirs and was struck often by how ahead of her time she was in her thoughts about empire, race, and equality. It has been widely rumored that Lady Edwina had an affair with Jawaharlal Nehru, which the film omits.

Om Puri, who plays Aalia's father, died in January, having achieved the rare career that traversed the Indian, British, and American film industries, in mainstream blockbusters as well as art films. He appeared in *Gandhi* (1982) near the start of his career, so this film closes that loop.

Broad conversation topics...

Upstairs/Downstairs: Chadha has said that the Viceroy's House usefully provided her a single location where multiple English and Indian characters of multiple class positions could cross paths—helping her, too, in her second goal of showing how political decisions by an elite few carry huge ramifications in the lives of average people. Did you think the film showcased these connections effectively, or would you have preferred more emphasis on fewer stories?

Romance: Almost every story of Partition made in almost every country that has produced a film on this subject relies on stories of lovers or families torn apart as a way to lend emotional depth to the geopolitical drama. Did you appreciate the romantic-triangle subplot, or were you more interested in the machinations among Nehru, Jinnah, Mountbatten, Gandhi, and the others?

Past and Present, Pt. 1: In one interview, Gillian Anderson expressed amazement at how much the *production* of the film involved deep immersion in a historical era whose details remain so little-known to many people, whereas the *promotion* of the film has been heavily consumed by questions about contemporary parallels, particularly regarding refugee crises in the Middle East, North Africa, Myanmar, and elsewhere. As you watched *Viceroy's House*, was your attention mostly on the historical particulars or where you thinking about modern parallels?

Past and Present, Pt. 2: Though the script takes the arrival of the Mountbattens as its starting point, a number of decisive contexts have already played out before the film begins: the origins of the Jeet-Aalia love story, including her father's imprisonment; the Mountbattens' successful career in Burma; and, most decisively, Churchill, Jinnah, and the previous Viceroy's devising of the secret plan to create Pakistan. Would the actual events in the movie have registered more strongly with you if it had represented these backstories more directly? Or did it make sense that, personally and politically, the present is always dictated by histories that never die?

Violence and Blame: Chadha has said she wanted to avoid demonizing the Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs as committing the *first* or the *most* acts of violence around Partition. One of her tactics is to leave a great deal of the brutality off screen: for example, the bloody riots in Punjab that Mountbatten learns about at an outdoor cocktail party, and the massacre on the midnight train to Lahore, from which Aalia turns out to be the only survivor. Some people have critiqued the movie for seeming too much like a decorous period drama and overly focusing on the Mountbattens, rather than confronting the extremity of what happened and making the Indian characters the clear lead characters. How did you feel about the choices the film made here?

“In India, There Are No Straight Lines”: Michael Gambon's character says this to Simon Callow's frustrated boundary-drawer when he shows him the secret plans that already exist for cleaving Pakistan from India. In fact, the tension between straight lines and chaotic disruptions is built into the way the film is shot. Most of the images in the first half are very symmetrical, photographing elegant exteriors and interiors that are centered in the frame, at right angles to the camera, which stays mounted on its tripod. By the end, the camera is often diagonal from what it shoots and is often handheld, so the visuals are wobbly and erratic—just as India itself descends into chaos. Did you notice these filmmaking patterns, or others that spoke to you?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Epigraph: Chadha starts the film with the famous maxim “History is written by the victors,” often attributed to Winston Churchill, though this ascription has been debated. Did this opening text affect the way you watched what followed? How much did you know about Partition already?

Misleading Artifice: “This is what I imagine England looks like,” Jeet enthuses as he stares at the bust of Queen Victoria in a grand, gleaming corridor of the Viceroy’s House. “England is all slums and bomb sites,” his friend Duleep responds, reminding him that World War II has only just ended, and that its heavy costs are the whole reason England can no longer afford its empire. As much as the movie parades beautiful locations, rooms, and costumes before our eyes, it also frequently exposes these as cumbersome or self-conscious illusions—for example, we first see Lord Mountbatten as he primps before a mirror on the airplane, and soon afterward we witness how much hidden labor is involved in assembling his immaculate uniform.

...and Yet: It isn’t just violent scenes the film omits. Chadha also leaves out the actual swearing-in ceremony of the Mountbattens, forsaking a great opportunity for visual eye-candy. We only watch them proceeding into the room and otherwise hear the ceremony over the radios or from behind the curtains where the servants wait. This might be a cost-saving measure for a frugal production, but also suggests it isn’t interested in dazzling us with lush pageantry. (The movie also omits Mountbatten’s entire visit back to England to plead the case for Partition to Churchill—also a frugal choice, and one that keeps us claustrophobically trapped in India.)

Editing: As Jeet reconnects with Aalia’s blind father at the outdoor wedding party, the former political prisoner asks what has brought Jeet to Delhi. The younger man answers, “I am working for Mountbatten” and the scene immediately cuts. I assumed Aalia’s father would be disconcerted at Jeet’s choice to work for the imperials but we never find out. The film often does this: ending a scene just before we glean a character’s response to volatile news or events.

Editing: Chadha must have decided while shooting that she wanted to film separate close-ups of each major character in all the major negotiation scenes, such that they are typically framed in isolation from each other. Rather than watch an entire conversation unfold in real time among multiple parties, as we would in a theater, we see people with different agendas (say, Lord Mountbatten, Lady Mountbatten, and Jawaharlal Nehru) in solo shots, unable to be in the same *image*, much less arrive at the same agreements or beliefs. This is important in a story that is all about whether India and its populations can be unified or will forever be splintered apart.

“Muslims don’t want to be treated like American Negroes”: Muhammad Ali Jinnah hereby insists that Muslims will never hold real equality in an India where they constitute only one-quarter of the population. This is one of many moments when other histories are mentioned as relevant context to what’s happening in India: for instance, the movement to establish Israel is mentioned as a positive parallel to the creation of Pakistan as a haven for Muslims. Not only do these moments of dialogue remind us that all the politicians in the movie have a keen sense of world events (they are never thinking about India in isolation), but it’s also a way for the film to cue *us* to view this particular tale as an analogue for other global crises, then and now.