Note: This short essay is an expanded version of a review that was featured as the 15 June, 2006 installment of Sightings, the online publication of the University of Chicago’s Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion.

Long before its U.S. release this spring—long before any of the footage I saw had even been shot, in fact—Water, Deepa Mehta’s movie about Hindu widows living in seclusion on the banks of the Ganges, had already become a cause célèbre. Mehta is based in Canada and her films, which rely on international financing and talent, are exercises in a distinctly hybrid style of cinema, a fusion alluded to by the title of a 2002 feature, Bollywood/Hollywood. She had planned to complete the feminist trilogy that she had begun in 1998 with Fire and continued in 1999 with Earth by shooting Water in 2000. The location she had chosen was also the designated setting of the film’s narrative: the North Indian holy city of Varanasi.

Fire, which deals with a lesbian relationship between sisters-in-law in contemporary Delhi, had famously met with controversy upon its release, violent demonstrations having been mounted at theaters by militant groups that decried its love story as un-Indian and anti-Hindu. (God, nation, and a patriarchal model of the family are habitually collapsed onto each other among Indian no less than American right-wingers.) And in due course advance word of Water’s theme, coupled with the filmmaker’s reputation as a feminist provocateur, likewise fired elements of the Hindu chauvinist
right. When a mob organized by the hardline Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, destroyed the sets that had been built in Varanasi, Mehta, who had also received death threats, withdrew to Canada and turned her attention to the more lighthearted Bollywood/Hollywood.

In 2004 Water returned to South Asia, although not to India. Mehta recast the production and quietly shot it on sets that had been fabricated in a North Indian architectural idiom on the banks of a river in Sri Lanka. The shift to an ersatz Varanasi has liberated her project not only from the opposition of Hindu militants but also from a host of visual and narrative challenges: the film’s look relies on cool compositions of blues, greens, and grays, a controlled palette that would have been difficult to isolate on the vibrant and crowded Varanasi riverfront; the tight, didactic lines of Mehta’s script would have likewise left little room for the site’s sociological and historical richness.

The film’s fictional city is called “Rawalpur,” said to be located on the Ganges somewhere in Hindi-speaking North India, although the tropical verdure and the clashing accents in the dialogue of some of the principals tend to cut against even such a loose identification. The drably garbed widows who live out their vows of poverty by the river have long featured as a defining image of Varanasi, but Mehta’s Rawalpur is conspicuously wanting in the other metonyms that have circulated over the centuries of Varanasi’s fame as a center of pilgrimage (and thus of tourism): sacred bulls, holy men, boat traffic, the silk trade (doubly elided here by both the sanitized city of the film and popular representations of its real-life counterpart are the Muslims who provide that industry’s labor). What has been gained, along with compositional and narrative clarity, is a certain prettiness, a glamorous sheen mediated through the transnational idiom of
upscale tourism. For all its archaic social injustice—the film is set in the 1930s—Rawalpur has the look of the kind of lush retreat where you can get a really soothing Ayurvedic massage. The packaging effect is underscored by the casting as the romantic leads of Lisa Ray and John Abraham, light-skinned model-actors strongly identified with advertising campaigns and both well known for their chests.

When *Memoirs of a Geisha* opened last Christmas, the British newspaper *The Scotsman* reported on disputes between the director, Rob Marshall, and several Japanese members of the production over questions of authenticity. One musician objected to the use of “aggressive, choppy music from Northern Japan,” saying it conveyed the wrong atmosphere for cultivated Kyoto (established as the capital of geisha culture and celebrated as such in the *Memoirs* novel). “But this film does not take place in Kyoto,” Marshall is said to have replied. “This is an imaginary city.” Of course, *Memoirs of a Geisha* is an Oriental fantasia in a long Hollywood tradition. Should the bar be set higher for *Water*’s sense of place? The answer to that question, I would say, has to do with the director’s credibility as a politically engaged Indian filmmaker.

Throughout her elemental trilogy, Mehta has used her female protagonists as vehicles for critical perspectives on gender norms, examining varied but—within the context of Indian feminist debates—well-recognized topics: in *Fire*, the straitened sexuality of middle-class housewives; in *Earth*, the erotics of the India-Pakistan Partition; in *Water*, the harsh code of conduct enjoined on widows by Hindu scriptures, which mandates modesty in the image of self-denial (in matters of diet, attire, toilet, and sociality) and of shame (at surviving the husband). Yet Mehta’s films are not known for well-rendered character portraits. In the absence of psychological depth, her audiences—
arthouse patrons in the West, primarily metropolitan elites in India—look to cues she deploys from conventional Bollywood cinema, such as stock character types or impressionistic music-video-style numbers, to anchor the text in the kind of cultural rootedness that would endow its critique with authority. And ultimately, as I have suggested, *Water’s* claim to this kind of anthropological thick description does not deliver much more than the clichés of tourist brochures. At best, the picture is complicated by the self-exoticizing irony of images marketed to Indian yuppies, and the liberal impulse to romanticize poverty that animates the contemporary phenomenon of Western “poorism” in countries like India and, within it, to sites like Varanasi’s riverfront.

There is no question that the tactics of the mob that demolished *Water’s* sets were reprehensible, and the program of its leaders both obscurantist and deeply cynical. Given the historical centrality of the movement to reform widowhood to the development, in the colonial period, of modern discourses of the Indian nation and the Hindu religion, nothing in the film’s narrative could reasonably be construed as an insult to either. Indeed, according to Mehta, none of the rioters had even read the script. I’m sure she’s correct, but I can’t help noting that the very dismissal of the script suggests a contrary point. More concerned with visual as opposed to narrative representation, the Varanasi militants may well have been venting, in part, a rancorous take they already held on the constant, postcolonial re-imaging of their lives and spaces by tourists with cameras.…

And then again, in my brief time working in film production I have myself seen how the dirt and grain of location shoots have a way of intruding on the most controlled of directorial visions. No place in the world has been celebrated simultaneously as the
locus of filth and transcendence as Varanasi has. The irony is that in denying their city—in all its messy surplus of meaning—a chance to expand Mehta’s lens, its self-appointed guardians have done not only her and her audience but themselves a disservice.