

The Exhilaration of Dread: Genre, narrative form and film style in contemporary urban action films¹

Ravi S. Vasudevan
Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi

Some crucial transformations occurred in the city of Bombay in the early 1980s. There was the epochal failure of the Bombay textile strike of the early 1980s and a basic reordering of political economy, with shifts away from the factory system into more dispersed forms of production, and an undercutting of labour's presence in public political life. This moment precipitated a crisis for leftwing perspectives, and was paralleled by the emergence of a powerful Hindu chauvinistic politics at the local and national levels. The Shiv Sena acquired political presence in the state and this right wing regional movement linked up with the nationwide Hindu political mobilization under the Bhartiya Janata Party and its radical wings, leading to the devastating attacks on the city's Muslim population in 1992-93. A few months later, bomb blasts in the city were seen as revenge attacks associated with a Muslim underworld. Alongside these political upheavals, Bombay, like many other metropolises in India, became the object of various programmes for urban reorganisation, in keeping with the imperative of inviting large-scale foreign investment. The drives to clear urban space fell most heavily on the subordinate sections of Indian cities, vendors, hawkers, small workshops and artisanal units.

We can see well enough how a cinema of urban anxiety has ample sources to develop its scenarios from the life world of the city and the nation. Indeed, the cinema produces a sense of turbulence and transformation, but to seek linkages

¹ This article follows on from discussions at the Sarai workshop on this theme, held at Sarai, CSDS from 29 November-1 December 2001. References to arguments by Moinak Biswas, Ravikant, Ira Bhaskar and Jeebesh Bagchi are to their oral interventions at the workshop.

between one phenomenon and the other may be to fail to engage with the range of forms, energies and social vistas that compose the cinematic experience of the city. In this essay, I seek to address the specifics of film narration, form and history, with a particular concern for how a sensorium related to the city exists in the cinema and can be identified and explored.

By choosing the urban action film for reflection, I will dwell on the mechanisms of storytelling, of excitement and astonishment which accompany tales of fear and danger. The paradoxical relationship of audiences to such entertainments suggests the duality posed by such genres, where the audience is invited to enjoy the pleasures of heightened kinetic engagement and perception while entering fraught narrative worlds governed by a gathering sense of anxiety. This then is a cinema which conveys to us the exhilaration of dread, with all the ambivalence that phrase is designed to convey.

The transformation of narrative structures

One of the most significant transformations wrought in this genre, and more broadly in the contemporary cinema, is the transformation of narrative structures away from older binaries. Moinak Biswas notes that there is in these fictions an effective end to the old lexicon: east/west, country/city, police and criminal underworld, perhaps even, we may add, to the opposition between public and private domains. To explore the sensibility of the period, Ranjani Mazumdar, for example draws upon one node, that of the depressed and dystopian urban subjectivity that defined the Bombay of the mid-1980s. Such a mood is only able to conjure up the most fleeting of residual utopian energies in its references to a country idyll as object of longing for the doomed characters of Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Parinda/Pigeons* (1989). Shohini Ghosh articulates another depletion of binary symbolism in her analysis of mythic archetypes in the structuring of narrative logics and worlds. She notes the shift from the characteristic *Karan-Arjun*, legitimate/illegitimate oppositions in the construction of the hero. There is the emergence of a more directly ambivalent and tortured rather than split self, in the persistence of Karan and the emergence of Abhimanyu as distinct figures in the landscape of the contemporary (Ghosh, 2001). The latter is of course particularly pertinent, legitimate and yet a victim for his inability to gain the full knowledge which would enable him to move from secured, stable and legitimate territories into dangerous and hostile zones and back again.

The particular confusion and continuity between spaces designated as opposed, such as in the relationship between public and private, conveys a sense of the contemporary urban imaginary as a kind of maze. One of the most interesting popular films of the 1990s, *Baazigar/The player* (Abbas-Mustan, 1994) approaches this question through a scenario of subaltern masquerade and entry into upper class

society. While the objective is to expose the cutthroat underpinnings of legitimate wealth, the strategy of class expose opens the protagonist to an amoral, instrumental logic, and finally to death and self-destruction. There is no doubt that the contemporary imaginary of cinema is, at its most productive, devoted to such senses of an unstable and dangerous subjectivity. This allows us to capture a fluidity of symbolic space and poses, in turn, a problem for spectator empathy and identification.

New forms of knowledge

Apart from the broad symbolics of narrative structure, there are issues relating to the nature of cognition and forms of knowledge which define the fictions of urban anxiety. How does one account for the distribution of narrative attention amongst various characters, in ways which appear to both reside within but perhaps fundamentally stretch melodramatic binaries? These films displace focus from good/evil oppositions, or at least suggest that this frame does not provide adequate explanations. In the process, they may actually help us understand that terror reduces everyone to vulnerability, and perhaps this has something to do with the way life is imagined in the city. A discussion of *Parinda* shifted focus from the overt, morally calibrated central characters to the villain, the Tamil gangster Anna (Nana Patekar), a figure whose psychosis invites audience fascination in very distinctive ways. Interestingly, a careful reading of the film will suggest that the key event which defines the psychosis - the burning of Anna's wife and son - is contradictorily rendered. We do not know if Anna enacted the horror, or was witness to it, whether it was an expression of psychosis, or whether the horror in turn precipitated Anna's madness, punishing him for the will to survive and dominate others. (In this sense we have here the dystopian rendering of another tale of Tamil immigration and violent assertion, Mani Rathnam's 1987 *Nayakan/Hero*, but now in a manner where the issue of Tamil subalternity in the city is suppressed). Ultimately, as Jeebesh Bagchi suggests, the locus of authority shifts to an opponent, Moosa, astute in manipulating the weakness of others, but otherwise so marginal and almost phantom-like in characterization that he is not so much character as presiding intelligence. Of course, this is only another level of narrative authority identifiable in the diegetic world. For there is always the extra-diegetic, the position which constructs the space-time of the narrative world and assigns functions to its inhabitants. Whether we call this by the name director, generic convention or its transmutation, or whether we call it the position which emerges from a self-reflexive critical discussion about the dominant epistemologies which organize perception in the narration of terror, one thing is clear: this intelligence appears to assume that the source of terror in the city always slips away, beyond the field of full knowledge, and into some cavernous other space.

The perception of space

This leads us directly onto another thematic, how symbolic narrative dimensions and narrational mechanisms can be conceived of in terms of the links between key and recurring spaces in the cinematic exploration of urban being: police stations, courts of law, the space of the criminal organisation, the home, and the cluster of *mohalla*, bazaar and street that often provide crucial coordinates for the way the 'social' domain in the cinema of urban action and revenge is rendered. Crucial to the *mise-en-scene* of urban terror is the premise that characters are rarely able to conceal themselves from some overarching gaze, that all spaces are vulnerable to surveillance, and characters are liable to receive messages and other intimations of danger in the most sacrosanct of spaces.

Mazumdar's spatial analysis of *Parinda* indicates an almost schematic rendering and opposition between a domestic space already infiltrated by the criminal history of an elder brother, and the criminal underworld, Anna's factory. As Mazumdar shows, a super-ordinate terror continuously threatens the melodramatic space of romantic possibility, weaving itself into the sentimental construction of domestic bliss. The young couple Karan and Paro's idyll is constantly interrupted by anonymous intrusions and ultimately by death. However, the film redefines space, extending it to character interiority. Terror intrudes into the very psychology of the primary assailant, visiting on Anna irrupting visions of past traumas and premonitions of doom. Mazumdar points out that Anna's garlanding of a photograph of himself and his dead family at the outset of the film seems to cast him in the role of a wraith, a figure already from the beyond whose cold ruthlessness covers an interior world governed by his own escalating fears.

Ira Bhaskar draws our attention to the importance of gothic scenarios to the *mise-en-scene* of terror. Anna's factory draws on the gothic lineage of dark dungeons and cobwebbed attics, spaces that disclose the inner logic of their narrative worlds. The factory circulates drugs under the guise of oil production, but is primarily intelligible as an assembly line for dead bodies. We enter this space to look at this processing of death, the secret spectacle that constitutes the inner reality of the city. Here, bodies are mutilated by drills, churned along with kernels, and flushed down waste disposal chutes. Ultimately, however, the bodies return, or persist, as elements of the uncanny. The corpse of Anna's lieutenant, Abdul is propped up in a sepulchral coffin as if to leer at Kishan. Framed alongside the coffin, the hero's body contorts with a realisation of the ultimate destiny of a life started at the margins of the city and now manifest in the annihilation of his brother. The hero knows this space, his instincts are bound up with a knowledge of its precincts and practices. But he desires another destiny for his brother. However, the factory of death comes to be recognised fatalistically, sickeningly, as the resting place, ultimate home in this homeless world. Thus might Freud have construed this uncanny, *unheimlich*, so remote, so other, and yet so undeniably and dreadfully home.

In these abstract spaces the narrative world is pared down to certain essential units of meaning. But these scenes are also stylistically elaborate and draw upon international generic codes. Mazumdar develops interesting comparisons between this narrative of doom and the post-war American genre of film noir (Gopalan, 2002). Spaces wreathed in shadows, a night city empty of people or populated by anonymous crowds, a soundtrack filled with the portent of danger by the constantly ringing phone from some demonic source, all these suggest a rather self-conscious drawing on of codes generated elsewhere, but, as I will suggest, historically available for the contemporary. Here fate, and its manifestation as an ever receding and untraceable authority, would appear to function as the other side of a social domain that has been swept away to reveal its underbelly.

A cinephiliac history

Here the question of history comes to face us as part of the history of cinephilia. In ongoing work on the analysis of this context, Lalitha Gopalan has suggested that this period signalled a new availability in India of a global cinema. She sites as important to this context the renewed import of US cinema after a long embargo, the circulation of films through the video market, and the induction of graduates from the Film and Television Institute of India into the industry (Mazumdar, 2001). It would be important to distinguish different moments in such a global circulation of the cinema; surely we have such an interactive discourse right from the beginning of the cinema, and in ways which do not reduce the global to American cinema. Nevertheless, the emergence in particular of a certain film-technical cinephilia with the arrival of the FTII graduate in the industry suggests a more precise node of transformation. In this context, film noir is not a historically remote phenomenon, but part of a synchronically available filmic resource.

The history of Bombay cinema is punctuated by formal transformations such as these. In the 1970s, the emergence of a character and an urban subjectivity which could not be recovered within legal and social hierarchies was accompanied by a transformation in filmic representations of Bombay. Hitherto iconically indexed by the establishing shot of Victoria Terminus, the Marine Drive or the High Court, the city extends into a kaleidoscope of visual fields. Rather than a realistically evoked space, the cinematic city becomes a stage for the working out of new types of conflict, rhythms of existence and subjectivity. A new aesthetic composes the city in terms of the elaboration of backgrounds, something that the contemporary period takes over and transforms into a tactile field that suffuses the subjectivity. To get to a sense of what I mean here by a tactile field, I will oppose it to the theatrical notion of the prop or the painted background, as something which shifts registers from a presentational to a more dynamic, virtual aesthetic. Rather than positioning us as external viewers of figures cast against a background, our look is drawn in and flows

amongst objects and figures within the space-time of the fictive world.

Let me use *Deewar/The Wall* (Yash Chopra, 1974) to describe the earlier form. A black and yellow cab rank provides the background to a debate about morality and pragmatism between two brothers. While this famous sequence draws on new iconic frames of reference, character relationship to setting is rendered statically, and the scene crucially depends on zoom shots and declamatory dialogue for its effects. Mazumdar's analysis of this scene draws upon Benjamin's notion of the ruin to understand the way in which an object or a space may be invested with memory or meaning that is fragmentary and is threatened with dissolution by the tyranny of history's onward march (Mehta, 2001). Here the narrative is brought to a halt, becomes spatialized and is opened to a rhetorical and melodramatic appeal to memory which transcends the impetus of the present moment.

This is a suggestive reading of the scene, one which we may juxtapose with an urban *mise-en-scene* from Priyadarshan's *Gardish/Celestial turbulence* (1994). Shiva (Jackie Shroff) is being chased by the hatchet men of the villain, Billa Gilani. The chase takes place across the roofs of cabs caught in a traffic jam. Figures thud across rooftops and collide with each other as Shiva pushes his assailants off him and counter attacks only in order to evade hem. Here objects and characters impact on each other, transposing dialogue to a discourse of bodies in space. Urban space is present to the characters who inhabit it, it is integral to the articulation of being. This is not to argue that one form is superior to the other, but that there is a braiding of urban elements with filmic techniques so that the filmic affords a new imagination for inhabiting the urban.

Other instances of a cinematic tactility of urban being abound, as for example in the way Bombay is defined by the monsoon. Black umbrellas provide for an extensive metonymization of the city in *Arjun* (Rahul Rawail, 1986), as they unfold en masse, glistening in the rain, and provide a textured space for violent pursuit and killing. It is an index of the self-consciousness of the cinema of this period that Rawail's film quotes here from an audacious motif in Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* of 1940.

Most important here is the railway station, and the railway tracks. In *Zanjeer/The Chain*, (Prakash Mehra, 1973) we are provided a sense of the everyday vulnerability of the massified city to the railway accident, as when a key witness to a gangland killing falls from his precarious perch on a crowded commuter train. Here villainous design precipitates the accident, as the assailant plunges his cigarette into his target's hand, thereby loosening his hold and despatching him to his death. But the documentary-like structures of the scene suggest something more precarious posed within the domain of contingency and chance in everyday urban life. Nevertheless, this scene, with its emphasis on close-ups to designate villainy, and its recourse to the studio for the shots of the train's interior, continue to inhabit a static, tableau rendition of its subject.

The railway track captures liminality and transience, and provides intimations

of impending dislocation as the existential condition of the urban. In *Zanjeer* we notice that the policeman hero, who will be framed and expelled from the police force, lives next to the railway track, and later he is beaten and cast down on the railway tracks from an overhead bridge. However, later, these symbolically significant backgrounds are transformed into features of subjectivity. In *Hathiyar/The Weapon* (JP Dutta, 1988), the violent, emotionally unstable protagonist accompanies his family to Bombay, where they take up residence in a tenement overlooking the railway track. As he listens to his parents in conversation with neighbours, his look is involuntarily drawn to the railway tracks. The character's distracted, edgy look integrates the space into the *mise-en-scene* of his neurotic subjectivity.

The films of the 1970s generated their own cinephilia, variously drawing on certain populist strands in Hollywood such as the work of Capra and Kazan, and international genre developments, such as Italian appropriations of the American western, as with Sergio Leone. But the particular highlighting of the cinematic apparatus as a body of techniques, and a fluency of their deployment, seems to be of more recent vintage. *Gardish* is notable for its use of steadicam, and in Ramgopal Varma's *Satya* (1998), for example, a gang fight is orchestrated via a highly self-conscious camera. A massive crane movement sweeps down the length of an apartment block to meet a gang as they exit from a lift. Subsequently, character and camera movement parallel each other, creating a dynamic doubling of presence, culminating in a top angle pan from the rooftops as we look down on the chase in the streets below. In a particularly resonant segment, the chase climaxes on an overhead suburban railway bridge, quoting from Friedkin's *The French Connection* (1971), and then crescendo-ing via Scorsese's De Niro/Pesci double gun burst in *Goodfellas* (1990) as the protagonists Bhiku and Satya dispatch their opponent Guru Narayan. The scene is cast against the backdrop of the train hurtling below. Apparatuses of cinema and everyday urban speed double each other, referencing the moment through a kind of world cinema parallax. Characters and actions shadow each other in phantom relay, the baton of form being carried into another territory of social experience. We have here an act of transposition of form where the experience of cinematic looking is not merely self-referential and autoerotic but enabling of a heightened perception of reality.

One of the issues here is squarely posed by Moinak Biswas, when he asks us to think about the relationship between the cinematic sensorium and the urban sensorium. Rather than simply catalogue parallels between the body of sense impressions that cascade from screen and the urban everyday - sounds, sights, senses of speed and volume and depth and surface - he asks to consider the limits of this sensorial flow, the way the senses are subject to disciplines of frame, narrative structure, rhythm and duration.

Realism/reality effects

Biswas goes on to argue that to deploy the category of realism to this new form in the 1980s would be to void it of explanatory force. He deploys the terms 'reality effect', even 'realism effect' to capture the 'realist gain', in the sense of an augmentation of object perception and perception of space, of volume and flow, that emerges in the cinema of this period. He situates this in the emergence of television and the new, global traffic in images of late capitalism and in the fluidity of post-modernist sign systems. In this argument, such heightened perception remains on the surface, and does not engage us in narrative depth. However, we have seen the impact of such formations elsewhere, and they are highly differentiated in the way they configure themselves in relation to local and global audiences. For example, in France, the '*cinema du look*', with its avowed subordination of narrative content to style, overlaps in a film such as Kassovitz' *La Haine/Hate* (1996) with the '*cinema du banlieu*', the cinema of the ethnic suburbs, films dealing with a sense of ethnic marginality and struggle.

Within the Indian industry, certain trends in the diaspora family film of the 1990s (which Monika Mehta's research into the industry has uncovered as the category of the 'family love Story'⁸) acquires a particular virtuality of appearance, place abstracted into a non-identifiable space of the globalized imagination. Films such as *Parinda*, *Gardish* and *Satya* emerge from a rather different matrix of production and exhibition. The urban action film has not been such an important vector of the film trade in the lucrative markets of the US and Britain, though there is no lack of a global traffic of images and, indeed, sequences, in the way they are put together. In these films, there is a strong orientation to local constructions of the city, of course inflected by the way Bombay functions as part of a national imaginary. Their 'reality effects' occasionally gesture to modes of observation associated with the documentary essay. The pro-filmic, the space organised for the camera, may be rendered in terms of a significant density of incidental activities which appear to have a logic which carries on irrespective of the actions of the main characters; until, of course, an action scenario emerges to bring a halt to the everyday pattern of events. The reality effect, as opposed to realist procedure, affords us an enhanced perception of this incidental space. For example, in *Gardish*, a washer-man's space in the market is indexed by the increased volume of the sound of clothes being beaten against the stone, and by a visual enhancement, sprays of water cascading upward in the frame.

As with *La Haine*, we may have something in the way of a hyperrealist form, perception being enhanced through but beyond the commonplace everyday, and with a certain deliberation. The reality effects of *Satya* are such that there is both recognition and a strange sense of hyper-location in the way the film privileges the spectator with perceptions about how the everyday social world and the world of terror are contiguous and threaten to overlap. A top-angle shot on a bar terrace above

a crowded Bombay street allows us to see goons mercilessly beat down on Satya as an unaware everyday concourse stream by on the street below. As Bhiku, Satya and their gang torture an opponent in a basement, we see Satya's beloved, Vidya, through a skylight which opens out onto the street above, as she walks along, unaware of what we are privileged to see. The systematic deployment of the steadicam, of seamless bodily movement and character focalization, essayed by Varma earlier as an abstract formal exercise notionally yoked to the horror genre in *Raat*, (1991) is in *Satya* recurrently deployed to problematize the inside/outside world in the city. Here the camera's bodily pursuit of a character highlights how privatized spaces may be rapidly infiltrated, often with violent results. Such a hyper- location, braiding the spectator into spaces that are differentiated, draws upon the omniscient conventions of classical narration. Separated spaces can be figured as adjacent, as collapsing into each other, and as rapidly negotiable, via that key apparatus of contemporary communication, the mobile phone.

This is where we may consider that realism is still very much an issue in the contemporary action film, especially in the bid of this cinema to build a coherent spatio-temporal universe dominated by notions of verisimilitude. In a film such as *Satya*, we can see how this is very specifically a Hollywood strategy of exercising a limit, as Biswas might call it, in the sense of building continuity, where a highly consistent narrative dovetailing of sequences is developed. However, the popular format of the Bombay cinema insures that other registers of play and performativity can be drawn upon to complicate such an agenda, if consciously harnessed to infiltrate the overall structure. Here we need to continue to focus on the multi-diegetic composition, indeed, spaces of multiple narrations, of Indian popular cinema to understand the way the spectator is inserted into the cinematic imagining of the city.

Ravikant points out that in some of the key song sequences, especially "*Goli maaro bheje mein*", the comic and parodistic outlook of the male student hostel and 'bachelor party' is evoked to provide a particular spectatorial access to the gang world. Realism is displaced by a scenario which allows us imaginative access to the point of production, the way perhaps script writer Saurabh Shukla, *Satya's* Kalumama, fabricated the group dynamics of the film's narrative world, through group interaction and performativity. This gesture to off-screen narrative worlds gives us a particular entry point for *Satya*, and in ways which periodically distance us from its narrative drives. This is not of the mode exactly of Brechtian realism, or the Iranian director Makhmalbaf's perspectivist strategies which stress the importance of perception for an engaged response to reality, for the rest of the narrative abides by a relentless generic drive. However, it nevertheless suggests a movement between distance and immersion in the way spectatorial stances are mobilized, and the layered spaces through which the cinema engages the city.

I will conclude these reflections on the contemporary cinema of urban anxiety by, for the moment, only gesturing to the question of politics. There are ways in

which contemporary political transformations are echoed in these films, as in the phenomenon of the extended male group, founded on neighbourhood ties and united by a perceived sense of deprivation based on fallen status. Such fictional focuses certainly become more obvious in terms of character formation in the cinema of this period, and echo the worldview of the Shiv Sena in Bombay. This is especially so of the work of N. Chandra, as in *Ankush/The Goad* (1986), but is observable in a host of other films. Such discourses were to acquire a national frame of reference with the high caste investment in a resurgent political Hinduism in this period, crucially crystallizing around reactions against the VP Singh government's attempt to implement the Mandal Commission report on reservation for backward castes in 1990.

However, the overall political framing of experience through the cinema is probably more complicated. Can we come back to the political through the play of sounds and images that compose our relationship to the genre? Let me end by pointing to a motif in *Satya*, which may be construed as a cinephiliac intervention in contemporary forms of political spectacle. Satya, determined to avenge his comrade Bhiku, arrives at the Ganesh chaturti on the beach, an urban spatial practice associated with over a century of nationalist mobilization, and a crucial cultural form in contemporary Shiv Sena and Hindutva politics. Bhiku's assassin, Bhau Thakre, the gangster successfully turned politician, presents himself and his followers before the deity. As Satya moves in, the camera focuses on the red cloth which he has swathed around a knife. The red sheath bobs along in the crowd, reminding us of a similar scene in Coppola's *The Godfather, Part II* (1974) in which Vito Corleone moves through Roman Catholic festivities to target the local gangleader. Satya stabs Bhau Thakre to death, and as the scene dissipates in chaos, we are left with a haunting image. The camera is positioned at the lofty elevation of the deity, looking down on the solitary figure of the dead villain as the ebb and flow of the tide tugs at his body. His followers dispersed, his command over spectacle voided, his rag doll body is offered up for a view that at once assumes the cosmic perspective of the deity, and the cultural momentum of a cinephiliac camera that enframes it. We do not need to recognise the cinematic reference to be caught in the allure of the moment. It is as if the film invites us to be carried along by the rush of a sensorium specifically composed by our investment in the cinema. The energy of that very particular compact between screen and audience is then channelled as an intervention into the contemporary, disembowelling one form of political spectacle by our heady engagement with another.