Chapter 2: Inhabitations of the Middle Class

I
The preceding chapter looks at the fashioning of what seems to be a new identity for a consuming middle class in the contemporary mainstream ideologically underpinned by a validation of affluence and consumption. Finance capital made its presence felt textually onscreen as well as in the value accorded to actual investment in the making of the film.

While the film industry geared itself to a new audience in the validation of affluence (also translating as the capacity to spend), certain economic policies impinging on the domain of film exhibition, like the revamping of existing theatres and the commissioning of newer ones, significantly facilitated the reorientation of the industry for this new ideal addressee. This move was also important as an attempt to counter the closure of cinema halls in the mid ’90s following the growth of video and cable. The industry was eager to win back the segment of the audience which had withdrawn from the theatres to the seclusion of their own homes. The new cinema halls were widely expected to usher in “a new phase in show-biz—that of providing clean, wholesome family entertainment in hygienic surroundings.” 84 Talking about one of the first of its kind, Sona, a mini cinema hall, in Borivli East, Raju Shah, Director of Tejas Holdings Private Limited which owned the proposed mini-theatre, said “The ticket rates […] have been fixed, slightly higher than the prevailing market rates, mainly to attract families and keep off undesirable elements.” [italics mine] 85 The textual excision of undesirable elements, violence, gore, sex and sadism—deemed unsuitable for the tastes of the new audience was already underway with family films like Hum Aapke Hain Koun…! (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994) as I have noted earlier. 86 But how the process of instituting its infrastructural counterpart would indirectly establish

84 “Sona’ may usher in a mega season for mini cinema halls in Mumbai’ in Indian Express (Bombay) 12th July 1996.
85 Ibid.
the terrain for representations of the middle class by informing and inflecting both
the *vocabulary of experiences* and the *formal vocabulary* available to the medium
of cinema is one of the things that I will concentrate on in this chapter.

Over and above the rehabilitation of old single-screen theatres made amenable to
the comfort and security of a more affluent audience, there was the phenomenal
rise of the multiplex since 1997 in the major metropolises as well as in smaller
cities and towns.  

87 The structure of finance constituting of corporate investment
made for an overall vertical integration and corporatization of what used to be a
decentred structure of organization in the exhibition sector earlier, though it had
wielded negotiating power over film producers in a time of overproduction of
films when only a limited number of halls were available.  

88 Entertainment tax at
differential but mostly prohibitive rates in different states had always been
considered a major source of revenue for the state from the film industry, and this
period saw the closing of several single screen theatres following distended strikes
against escalated entertainment tax. But the growth of the multiplexes also
coincided with other post-liberalization economic restructurings, like the emphasis
put on the transformation of the Indian metropolis. Consequently, the multiplexes,
seen as an extension of the development plans, were offered substantial tax
exemptions for the first five years of their operation. Aided by the advantage that
they had over the existing single screen theatres, by 2007, i.e. the first ten years,
the multiplex sector managed to corner almost 34% of box office returns although
they represented only 0.6% of the cinemas in the country.  

89 If there has been a persistent strain of arguments about mainstream Bombay

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87 See Aparna Sharma 2003. ‘India’s experience with the multiplex’, *Seminar*, May 2003.
The information I cite here is supplemented by a talk given by Adrian M. Athique at the Film
Studies Department, Jadavpur University, on the multiplex phenomenon.

88 Someshwar Bhowmick in *Behind the Glitz: Exploring An Enigma Called Indian Film Industry*
(2008) argues that in the period between 1965 and 2000 there had been a growth of 127.4% in the
number of halls compared to that of 164% in the production sector. This in fact made a single big
budget film more lucrative than several smaller budget ones from the producers’ point of view in
terms of the arbitrarily exorbitant fees charged by the exhibitors to screen a film. On the other hand
the funds involved in garnering exhibition space left the smaller producers at a significant
disadvantage [see pp 54–55].

89 Data taken from Adrian M Athique, see footnote 87 above.
premised on the conception of a mass audience in terms of both production and reception, the industry at this juncture was internally gravitating towards increasing segmentation in the kind of films produced, not only in terms of content (as has been discussed at much greater length previously) but also in physically hierarchizing and cording off its preferred class of audience. The multiplexes, structured to be integrally enclosed within shopping malls, offered cinema alongside other practices of upscale consumption like shopping, or eating out, and managed to segregate its clients within gated walls in a previously unprecedented manner.

II Inclusivity, Segregation, Sanitization and the Nascent Spectre of Un-ease

It seems pertinent to argue that the new addressee of the Bollywoodized mainstream had become empirically identifiable as an upwardly mobile middle class. The new configuration of the middle class as both physical audience and embedded spectator of the films of this period was marked by its distance from the old set of values consisting of frugality, the significance of cultural capital, etc. that had defined the erstwhile middle class of cinema. Nonetheless it would be misleading to think of this new middle class that was being increasingly addressed, represented and constituted by the new spate of films as being an entirely incipient homogenous social category that emerged with the liberalization of the economy even within the representational space of Bombay cinema.

My objective in this chapter is to locate lines of coincidence and terms of affinity between ways of apprehending this new middle class within the space of cinema with the widely differentiated representations of the emerging middle class within a broader discursive field. This becomes productive especially in appreciation of the fact that most contemporary studies on the ‘New Indian Middle Class’ (Leela Fernandes, Arvind Rajagopal, Pavan Varma et al) focus on “the discursive production of the urban middle class as the site of commodity consumption and as the recipients of the benefits of economic liberalization”\textsuperscript{90} rather than an already

present sociological category that can be empirically fixed in terms of either its income or its social location.\footnote{The difficulty in fixing the category of the middle class solely by its income has been a persistent problem even in historical studies concentrating on the formation of the middle class in early colonial or post-independence India.}

In the moment of globalization, the discursive formulation of the middle class extended beyond its economic capacity to participate in the liberalized economy to a capacity to partake and make use of cultural products (including film, television, and the expanding network of informatics). This of course has larger implications in the context of the various possibilities of political participation and intervention in the life of the nation available to the middle class that are to be taken up in a latter chapter. But for the purposes of this chapter I will concentrate on the larger field of cultural consumption as circumscribing the form and content of what we can call a new middle class cinema (that focuses on the norms and aspirations of being middle class) in the space of production and reception opened up in the industry by the socio-economic transformations in the ’90s.

Primarily though, the crux of the difference of the new middle class from the old lies in its perception as a segment that was now unselfconsciously celebrating the availability of an unstoppable influx of commodities available in a liberalized economy as well as in its capability to fashion for itself a self-identity premised on the consumption of the same.\footnote{Ranjani Mazumdar elaborates on the various aspects of this shift in her chapter entitled ‘The Panoramic Interior’ in Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City, 2007, pp. 41–78.} At a very prosaic level this entailed the incorporation into the films of this period of material signs that an affluent middle class could relate to, for instance, for 

\textit{Chachi 420} (Kamal Haasan, 1998) the designers, for greater plausibility, decided to clothe Tabu playing a successful businesswoman in international designer brands instead of the usual flamboyant costumes that were commonplace for the portrayal of members of the upper classes till that time.

This incursion of a battery of signs indicating the presence of a new audience can be observed in a series of films that portray a city rarefied to the sites of upper class (material) consumption. Of these, \textit{Dil Chahta Hai} (Farhan Akhtar) released
in 2001 marked a crucial turning point in orienting the aesthetics of the mainstream towards the utter and absolute disappearance of all possible indicators of ‘otherness,’ presenting in the process multiple mirrored cities—Bombay, Sydney and Goa through spaces consisting of apartments, malls and offices—in other words, spotless posh interiors connected by the mobile interiors of cars and aeroplanes. What was remarkable in Dil Chahta Hai, however, was its utter elision of the very signs of existence of members of any other social class even from the ‘public’ spaces of the city. 93

Ranjani Mazumdar, talking at length about the rarefied sanitized spaces increasingly produced by the cinema of this decade talks about the approximation and replication of the perceptual scheme of the shopping mall in the way spaces and objects are organized and displayed in films. Mazumdar quotes Ann Friedberg 94 “[l]ike the experience of the shopping mall, cinematic spectatorship relies on a perceptual displacement of external reality, offering instead a controlled, commodified, and pleasurable substitution.” While on the one hand the ‘interior panoramas’ so constructed attest to the “spectator’s desire for a seamless commodity world,” the exteriors that could posit any degree of contrast with the interiors within the representative economy of the films were also being sanitized in accordance with the interiors. For example, for Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001), director Karan Johar asked “Pankaj Khandpur, the main special effects consultant [quoted by Mazumdar 95] […] to make sure the dirt of even the upmarket Chandni Chowk […] was removed through colour correction […] his job was to digitally coordinate and correct the colours, make fat people look slightly thinner, and also work on Amitabh Bachchan’s age lines.”

Mazumdar also fleetingly refers to (satellite) television playing an instrumental role in the production of yet “other spaces and worlds.” 96 Evidently, the presence

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93 As has been repeatedly pointed out, the only destitute person appearing in Dil Chahta Hai is a homeless vagrant whom Shalini encounters in a deserted subway station in Sydney and who literally recedes into the background as soon as Akash appears to dispel the moment of anxiety even before it can congeal.
94 Ranjani Mazumdar Bombay Cinema, 2007, p. 141
95 Ibid. p. 227, footnote 33
96 Ibid. p. 142
of aspirational lifestyles disseminated through satellite television had already begun to push the industry towards offering similar locales and technical finesse. Subhas Ghai in an interview to Filmfare given during the shooting of Pardes in Vancouver and Las Vegas in 1997, elaborated upon the noticeable “trend of Indian films being shot abroad”:

This had to happen. More than ever before, Indian film-makers are competing with one another to achieve the most attractive visuals. This is because of the growing exposure to western locations and films on the satellite channels…no one can expect the audience to accept shabby photography and ordinary locations anymore.

Also, Indian vistas like the ones in Ooty and Kulu-Manali have been done to death. Even Mauritius has been overexploited. And Europe has been tapped by so many film-makers…I would even have to say that Yash Chopra should have some sort of a copyright on Switzerland.

The multiple implications of Ghai’s explanation can be mapped across several simultaneous but related concerns afflicting the Bombay industry at this period: first, the expenditure on the production and constitution of such spectacles had come to be equated with the intrinsic value of the film. Second, Pardes (1997) was one of the first set of films to have found an overseas market for the sustenance of which filmmakers would strive to produce points of identification for its newly found but substantial diasporic audience. Third, the persistent concern in trade journals of this period expressed by film directors, financiers, distributors and exhibitors alike is located in the ability of these films to have the gentry keep their cars parked outside the theatres. Fourth, reviews and assessments of trends in the trade journals, that either evaluate films in terms of

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97 This point can be corroborated by two of Ganti’s observations: first, that the exposure to Hollywood and a host of satellite channels had nurtured an audience that was becoming more “cinematically literate” (Producing Bollywood, p. 95) and therefore increasingly discerning in their expectations from films and capable of paying more attention to technical finesse and details like shot composition, lighting and editing. And second, that there was an “element of the conquering explorer within producers […]and filmmakers] constantly in search of locations that have never been shown on the Indian screen.”(p. 255) Other than Switzerland, Ganti observes, “locations as diverse as Alaska, Egypt, Hungary, New Zealand, Norway and Namibia” appear in song sequences, if not as the locale for the stories themselves. (p. 254–255)
98 ’Westward Ho’ in Filmfare, January 1997.
99 Ibid. pp. 120–121
expected revenues or analyze the success or failure of films, categorically classify them in terms of being suitable for the emergent gentrified audience as compared to an older lumpenized mass which is no longer considered the prime source of revenue. Fifth, as stated above, there is the palpable pressure on the contemporary Hindi popular to produce technical expertise, gloss and spectacle at par with the fare presented regularly by satellite channels with which it shared a common audience.

The reorganization of a section of the industry exclusively addressed to this specific privileged class thus called for a concomitant reorientation of questions of aesthetics or taste. While this again was related to the exorcization of excesses of sex and violence from texts, and the sanitization and spectacularization of locales, it was by no means limited to them alone. It involved on the one hand the invocation and circulation of idioms in which the addressed constituency was fluent in terms of its cognitive capacities and also to acts of translation of dominant idioms now made amenable to and suitable for its consumption.

But even in the decade preceding the institution of a robust urbanistic multiplex culture, which was premised upon the potential of disposable income of the new middle class and its purported desire to secure safe, segregated and sanitized habitats for themselves, several films from within the mainstream itself were already beginning to probe a rather troubled relationship of the middle class to its newfound co-ordinates. Aziz Mirza’s films—for example, Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman (1992), Yes Boss (1997) and Chalte Chalte (2003)—all have the central protagonist (played by Shahrukh Khan in all three films) struggling in the process of becoming middle class. The films not only point to the abysmal economic gap internal to the apparently 200 million strong middle class (as projected in estimates identifying a potential market to which foreign investment can be lured), but also attest to the historical process of an emerging segment vying to gain entry into the new middle class. Aziz Mirza’s background as a co-

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100 I will withhold a discussion of Mirza’s 2000 film Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani because of its significance in negotiating another important aspect of middle class politics as it was emerging in this decade, namely the place of the mediatized public sphere and the possibility for collective political intervention it entails.
founder of ISKRA along with his brother Saeed Mirza and Kundan Shah is significant here for the perspective he brings to these comedies that deal with the very viability of the notion of potential inclusivity that is posited at the heart of the construction of the new middle class. The process of inclusion, as identified by Fernandes, though open in theory to all, was in effect fraught with much difficulty and was subject to acquiring symbolic capital in the form of education, credentials, skills and cultural resources and was noticeably accompanied by purchasing commodities as markers of upward mobility. In Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman (1992) the first film directed by Mirza, the central narrative concerns itself with Raju, a young man from Darjeeling with a degree in civil engineering who comes to seek his fortune in Bombay. As a stranger to the city he is befriended by the locals in a lower middle class locality. Raju woos a local girl Renu with whom he shares his dreams of material achievement and of becoming gentrified (i.e. to become the ‘gentleman’ in the title of the film). In this film that Mirza says was loosely inspired by Shri 420 (Raj Kapoor, 1955) the role of the liminal vagabond, however, is displaced onto Nana Patekar playing a curious messiah like figure, Jai, in a tattered long coat and a floppy hat who makes his living from delivering acerbic commentaries on the inequities of social life in the rhymed argot of the street to spontaneous gatherings on thoroughfares, the representation of which is visually marked by the stark difference between the towering high-rises and the commoners at street level. The

101 Saeed Mirza is known for his incisive satires about (urban middle class to lower middle class) individuals caught in irreconcilable contradictions between their beliefs and assumptions regarding leftist politics, aesthetics, ethnicity, religion, national belonging, etc. and the nature of their social embeddedness which belie such assumptions and reveal the fissures in their consolidation. Significant films for Mirza in this context are Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastaan (1978), Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai (1980) Mohan Joshi Hazir Ho! (1984) and Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro (1989).

102 See Leela Fernandes, India’s New Middle Class, 2006.

103 This liminal figure at ease in the streets on the one hand had already returned to the centre-stage as a protagonist in the tapori figure in films like Ghulam (Vikram Bhatt, 1998) or Rangeela (Ram Gopal Varma, 1995) in both cases played by Amir Khan (see Ranjani Mazumdar ‘The Rebellious Tapori’ in her Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City, pp. 41–78). Nana Patekar, on the other hand, would distill this performative idiom, as Ravi Vasudevan observes “with his tautly controlled body and bravura, staccato dialogue delivery that functions as verbal assault […]lashing] his opponent with a cascade of ironic comment and irreverent wit, the whole laced with a mordant gallows humour.’(Vasudevan, ‘Selves Made Strange: Violent and Performative Bodies in the Cities of Indian Cinema, 1974–2003’ in body.city: siting contemporary culture in India, eds. Indira Chandrasekhar and Peter C. Seel, 2003, p. 110.)
city is represented in the film through the studio set of the lane with its tea-shop
where the locals gather (reminiscent of *Nukkad*, literally meaning street corner, a
 television serial co-directed by Mirza’s brother Saeed Mirza and Kundan Shah
that ran on Doordarshan between 1986–87), the bus stand outside Renu’s office,
Juhu beach where couples like them can only afford to seek privacy between and
behind boulders bordering the beach, the line of brightly lit shops and showrooms
in the city displaying wares (jewellery, garments, shoes, cars) that the couple
aspire to possess, and the interiors of offices, hotels and a new apartment
bestowed upon Raju by his employers, which overlooks a clearly artificial painted
backdrop of a sea view. The spaces are clearly marked by the disparity between
modes of living. Raju demonstrates his, and the film’s, affiliations on his first day
at work by ridiculing a proposed housing complex, Project Dreamland (with a
shopping complex, playground, joggers’ park and swimming pool, designed with
the help of an American architect) to argue that the common man (or ‘*aam janta*’)
from the ‘middle income group’ whom the complex is aimed at desires not
‘status’ but ‘amenities’ like a school, or bus stop, or a hospital. Predictably
enough though, Raju’s attempts are soon compromised by his desire for objects
like the car that he and Renu had once pretended to buy in a showroom (as an act
of fantasy make believe for the life that the two of them could have) and several
such other markers of upward mobility in the form of an apartment, expensive
suits, and business trips on airplanes, all provided by the construction firm where
he is employed. Raju finds himself increasingly entrapped in the internal tussles
for power at the firm, is implicated in a scandal involving bribes paid to
government officials for plan sanctions and underhanded deals in spurious raw
materials which, used for the construction of a bridge under Raju’s supervision,
collapses and kills the friends and neighbours from his locality whom he had
engaged as labour. The turn of events finally force Raju to take sides. In *Raju Ban
Gaya Gentleman* as well as in *Yes Boss* (1997), the next film by Mirza, there
remains the persistent foregrounding of this common man, the middle income
group not yet graduated into the new middle class. It is marked by its inability and
more importantly by its ethically charged dogged refusal to (literally) buy into the
new economy. In both films, affluence is always already marked by evidences of
moral compromise, corruption and avarice, and it is the hapless young protagonist
who has to make the choice to preserve his moral supremacy. By Chalte Chalte, made in 2003, the difference between the classes is no longer so stark in moral terms. Rather, it is a gap mapped onto a conjugal strife and it is in fact the male protagonist, again played by Shahrukh Khan, who casts imaginary aspersions on his wife Priya coming from an affluent NRI family based in Greece, caused by his own inability to grapple with the difference between the socio-economic backgrounds of their respective families.

This sense of disjuncture from the new horizon of inhabitation available to the potentially upwardly mobile middle class is a strain that would continue to make its presence felt in various guises in more recent films like Karthik Calling Karthik (Vijay Lalwani, 2010) or Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi (Aditya Chopra, 2010) more than a decade after their ideological precedents were being crystallized in Mirza’s narratives. In both films the central protagonist is torn between embodying one or the other end of the spectrum of the starkly differentiated middle class.

The aesthetic ramifications of having a newly consolidated audience was not strictly limited to the idiom of a successfully Bollywoodized cinema that would also crystallize in the latter half of the ’90s. Mirza’s films bear traces of the struggle to address the ideological crisis posited by the newly liberalized economy and its impact on the erstwhile middle class which was supposed to be the prime beneficiaries of the benefits. It is indeed difficult to ascertain and designate a ‘new middle class cinema’ in the face of the reorganization of the socio-political scenario in which upward mobility and consumption are already legitimised by prevalent discourses as pertinent to a middle class identity, and especially as the FFC funded cinema had by this time receded altogether as the political-aesthetic counterfoil against which the older middle class cinema had originally come to define its concerns and characteristics. It might therefore be more productive to take account of the thematic concerns and motifs that circulate in the films of this period through a somewhat different approach. The films that I look at in the remaining sections of this chapter (barring Delhi 6) are all to some extent bearers of the ideological contradictions of the new lay of the economy, and coexist
uneasily with their successfully Bollywoodized counterparts proficient in the process of rarefaction achieved by films like *Dil Chahta Hai* (Farhan Akhtar, 2001), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Karan Johar, 1998), *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*…! (Sooraj R. Barjatya, 1994), and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (Karan Johar, 2001), among others.

**III Aesthetics, Form and the Larger Field of Culture**

The multiplex phenomenon itself on the one hand had created an economic opportunity for the emergence of alternative practices from within the industry. Multi-screen theatres with their flexible timings created the space for exhibition of various kinds of films alongside big budget releases.

Experimental filmmakers like Ram Madhvani for example, a graduate from FTII Pune, would see the space as ideal for deploying a different strategy of marketing for his film *Let’s Talk* (2002). The extremely innovative publicity content for the film constituted of quotes and comments about the film from celebrities like Aamir Khan, Shabana Azmi, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Shyam Benegal and Pooja Bhatt which were put out in newspaper advertisements and printed on hand outs and posters, post-it notes and tickets distributed through Barista (a chain of coffee shops with outlets in all major cities), and by staging a mock fight between the lead couple in an Oxford Bookstore Cha Bar where the audience reaction was recorded for an episode of MTv *Bakra*.  

The effectiveness of the marketing ploy was premised on the understanding that it was targeted within a locale comprising chiefly of upmarket shops and cafes, and to a milieu which could *identify* with the protagonists on an extra-textual level. Madhvani’s aesthetic was indebted, by his own admission, to the Dogme 95 movement and its practitioners like Lars Von Trier and he had specifically instructed his actors to eschew the hyperbolic performative conventions of the mainstream.  

In aesthetic terms, the class based segregation of the exhibition circuit was beginning to be mirrored in the very possibility of having films that would be intelligible to a considerably smaller

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104 A humorous reality show where pranks are played on unsuspecting individuals.
section of audience on the basis of their familiarity with proximate idioms. To understand or identify with subjects as well as styles of filmmaking one required a cultural cognitive fluency including but not limited to the mainstream idiom since the process of making meaning often involved a degree of unmooring and recirculation of familiar iconologies, narrative techniques and apparatuses of representation.

*Let’s Talk* was a film made in English, on a Digital Video (DV) format blown up to 35 mm, with a crew of fifteen, and had in its cast the yet unknown Boman Irani along with Maia Katrak (a graduate from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, London). The film was structured on the thumri, a light classical vocal form where usually a single refrain is repeated with different emotional overtones. In the film, an affluent couple in their mid-thirties proceeds to talk in the closed confined space of their apartment in Bombay. In the non-sequential narrative their conversations traverse, like the thumri, several possible developments (polite acceptance, jocularity, marital rape). Television news covering inexplicable sightings of Lord Krishna punctuate these domestic segments thus lending a mythic register to a format (DV blown up to 35mm) and spatiality that demand an atomized spectator as their first premise.

The protagonists, according to the director were:

a contemporary kind of couple, world-traveled, etc. I just felt that I should also root it within the Indian culture. And because the structure was formed on the Thumri[…] I thought it would be good if I did some kind of a subtext using the Radha/Krishna myth.106

Madhvani goes on to elaborate that the format was strategically chosen to radically reduce the size of the shooting crew to a maximum of ten to twelve people and as a precedent he cites the example of the Dogme 95 movement. His primary intention, likewise, he says, was to provoke the actors into simply ‘genuinely being’ rather than ‘acting.’ But for a moment let us turn away from this ‘anti-performative’ drive inscribed in the film and its proclaimed intention to

106 From ‘Let’s Talk: Bollywood Coup d’État’ BRAINTRUST dv interviews.
break with the representative conventions of the mainstream and direct our attention to this other performative tradition of the thumri that the film purportedly derives its organizing principle from.

Vidya Rao discusses thumri as being expressive of the feminine voice, not because it had been traditionally performed by women artists for a small and intimate audience of male patrons but because the lyrics, and the way they are enunciated, are most often about a woman pining for her lover (though the woman’s desire is framed squarely in the male gaze). The radicalism of thumri, according to Rao, lies in the fact that in spite of its location within an oppressive gendered space thumri’s performative mode enables it to interrogate and reinvent the very constraints, both physical and ideological, that confine the woman. In repeating the refrain in different emotive overtones it brings out ambiguities and layers of meaning in the given lyrics. Though thumri, as a form, is considered less majestic than margi music, the intricacies of its training are premised on the singer’s ability to articulate varying states of mind. Rao says:

thumri seems to disorder the usual ways of performance. Thumri’s explication creates an almost unbearable dramatic tension—a disordering of accepted notions of time, space, identity of raga, tala [rhythm], bhava [emotion evoked], nayak-nayika [protagonists, literally hero heroine] […]

Temporality is created, experiences are recounted one by one […] These eternal presents and continuous pasts, and futures that have already happened, create more times, more ambiguity. All these times coexist simultaneously; this drama takes place in a magical time which is not past, present or future.108

The conversations between the couple structured on the logic of enunciation of emotions in the thumri are thus technically not a series sequentially taking place over time but are a succession of possibilities that might never have been

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108 Ibid.
actualized at all, and thus in effect puts narrative time in suspension. The mise-en-scene shifts from room to room in the apartment: dining area, living room, kitchen, bedroom, open terrace. There are eight segments of conversations between the husband and wife. Each segment literally comes into being along Radhika’s line of sight as the camera shows her turning towards the room where she sees herself embarking upon yet another conversation with her husband. Each section is terminated by the same thumri sung in a radically different emotional tone (often with entirely different instrumental accompaniments), that summarizes the mood of the last episode and inaugurates the next.

*Let’s Talk* thus first of all uses an apparatus of recording (the DV cam), explicitly avoids the performative hyperbole of the mainstream popular, and deliberately breaks with linear time by producing several coexistent temporalities that might never even have taken place, and as such, are not available to record. Though the conversations unfold within the confines of an apartment, they are for all practical purposes ensuing in the psychic space of Radhika’s speculations and anxieties in the non-sequential narrative. The ‘narrative’ itself is organized by the framing structure of the thumri, a single song whose nuances dictate the mise-en-scene of each episode.

Secondly, it ruptures the contextualizing frame of the contemporary by mobilizing an affect that seemingly belongs to an altogether different register. The film is book-ended with a television screen in a darkened room that, we know in retrospect, is placed in a store with its window open to the street. A newscaster on television talks about an inexplicable phenomenon that originates in Bombay and is slowly spreading in sporadic occurrences to the rest of the metropolises of the globe. Several people are claiming to have sighted Lord Krishna and have fallen to laughing uncontrollably after the encounter.100

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100 The husband and wife are named Nikhil and Radhika respectively after the eternal lovers Krishna and Radha. In each segment of conversation Nikhil reacts differently to the disclosure that Radhika has been having an affair with their interior decorator over the past six months and is pregnant, though she is not certain who the father might be. The lover is also named Krish, thus short-circuiting the possibility of mapping the Radha-Krishna trope neatly onto the couple.  
101 A section inserted in the middle of the film where Radhika is on the street talking on her cellphone shows a procession of widows in white sarees shot in slow motion holding up placards
The city that appears in the film is inundated with this unnamable affect which is not locatable anywhere specific, and is especially not locatable in a subject. Radhika is suspended on the verge of it till the very end of the film. The news reports on the other hand are outside the space where Radhika and Nikhil have their possible conversations. The couple, therefore, is neither subject to its effect nor at the receiving end of the newscasts. The newscasts function in the film as a medium of transparence (as liveness claims to be in the contemporary) but to a space that it fails to either explain or intervene into. The only possibility of the curative is posited in one’s belief in this phenomenon and one’s involuntary submission to it. The crux of this exercise is on the one hand to defamiliarize the everyday which has been so painstakingly constructed in Let’s Talk through the casting of the then unknown character actors unencumbered by the performative idioms of the mainstream to authenticate the lived world of an affluent couple that the addressee can identify with or at least relate to.

The DV format used (also used by Mira Nair for Monsoon Wedding in 2001 for similar purposes of producing familiarity and authentication) conveys the impression of documentation of an intimate space. The structure of the film attests to an interiority ascribed to the central protagonist that is beyond the pale of the melodramatic exteriorization demanded by the dominant mainstream. In all these aspects Let’s Talk remains a dialogic exercise that specifically engages with the circumscribing dominant mode of filmmaking in Bombay cinema. But the most important intervention over and above the formal innovations that are deployed to this end (and constitute one of the many possible directions taken by small budget filmmaking at this juncture) is that Let’s Talk mobilizes a network of affect associated with the ‘irrational’ repertoire of popular cinema and places it as the radical unthought that constitutes and lends meaning to the rational everyday lived world of a different register altogether.

with prints of Radha and Krishna on them, they are laughing. A woman in passing offers Radhika some prasad and blesses her. The street is filled with people reveling in the sightings, tableaux roll by with children dressed up as gods. A street urchin painted in blue dressed as Krishna with a flute in his hand taps on the glass windows of cars stalled in the traffic asking for money and is berated by Radhika’s driver.
Madhvani’s was by no means a stray example, as a considerable number of filmmakers emerged over this period with an oppositional or at least jocular engagement with the dominant conventions (Nagesh Kukunoor, Onir, et al) and who clearly had alternative idioms of filmmaking as their referential framework. But an almost equally significant number of efforts were also being made by the bigger production houses seizing this economic opportunity presented by the multiplex format where low budget films could have exhibition windows side by side with the more cost-intensive blockbusters.

Some formal elements were influenced to a large extent by other shifts in not only the film industry but in the audio visual media in general in this period, such as the presence of television as a medium of dissemination, the rhetoric of daytime soap or that of sting operation reportage most prominently undertaken by Tehelka in the 1990s, among others. It does seem only too obvious to observe that new technologies, styles and idioms of representation from other media (most significantly television) work their way into the mainstream popular with a gradual but unmistakable certainty in this period. But more significantly, each of these ‘styles’ depending on the particularities of their dissemination in this specific historical period, and specifically in the Indian context, also bring their own semiotic charge to the organization of representational content and what they might therefore signify onscreen. The use of the mode of live telecast of cricket in the case of Lagaan (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001), of documentary reconstruction in Black Friday (Anurag Kashyap, 2004) or that of surveillance and hidden cameras in Love, Sex and Dhokha (Dibakar Banerjee, 2010) would not only determine the narrative configuration within the space of a single film but would also address the trajectories of earlier and future negotiations of the film industry with these modes in a two way traffic. It is precisely the workings of these micro-negotiations between these non-film media and the larger popular idiom of Bombay cinema (that can be summarized as an impulse to melodrama, hyperbolization of character and situations, the investment in performing an Indianness, and the spectacularization of song and dance segments) that also require to be explored. A
set, if not all, of these negotiations will become relevant as the lens through which urban inhabitation must be configured in the film texts under discussion in the following sections. Most importantly it is necessary to recognize that these instances of deployment through repetition, familiarization and systematization would come to represent something resembling the crystallization of generic tendencies and would generate their own expectations that can subsequently be mapped across production houses or directors. The discussions of films in this chapter try to capture some such representative tendencies at different moments in the process of their constitution. The focus on specific directors, Mirza, Bhandarkar or Varma in this chapter thus is concerned less with the intentions or styles of each director than with larger tendencies that are thrown in sharper focus through the ongoing processes of negotiation and confirmation within the space of the work of specific directors or production houses that are symptomatic of the period in question.

As a relatively recent example of the circulation of idioms, and their relevance to producing an elaboration of the travails and concerns of the middle classes in the context of a liberalized economy, the 2009 film *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* (Shimit Amin\(^{111}\)) provides some interesting insights into the terms of re-circulating concerns of middle class cinema from an earlier era. *Rocket Singh*, an experimental venture from Yash Raj Films, one of the older big budget production houses, uses the low budget aesthetics of television. Its camera movements and editing distinctly replicate the mobile camera of reality shows and television sitcoms on the one hand (rapid swishes left and right with the screen momentarily going out of focus to accommodate other characters, montages of individual reaction shots from the entire ensemble of characters present in a situation) and a music video like pastiche on the other—iris-out shots that start with Harpreet, the central protagonist, in the middle of the frame that opens out to show him riding his new scooter into the city, for instance, or a title sequence showing stills of several household objects in colour saturated extreme close-ups (an alarm clock, toothbrushes in a blue plastic cup, plastic hangers and clothes pegs framed in front...  

111 Amin is also director of the encounter thriller *Ab Tak Chhappan*, 2004 and *Chak De India*, 2007.
of tiled walls with a bathroom mirror). A review of the film in *Outlook* magazine by Namrata Joshi[^1] points out the intimate texture of everyday middle class life that the film manages to convey through this meticulous detailing that sets the tone for the rest of the film. The object world invoked in Rocket Singh is in emphatic contrast to the consumer sensorium of Bombay cinema’s Bollywoodized counterparts in its very quotidian nature. This array of objects is naturalized with respect to the needs versus luxury binary which had furnished the critique of middle class consumption (in Pavan Varma,[^2] for example). It is this very projected ordinariness of the objects constituting the fabric of the middle class existence that the film represents and which also lends a distinctive authenticity to it. These objects, the review says, are:

like ‘still life’, prosaic, silent paintings illustrating the ordinariness of middle-class life, wherein seemingly insignificant objects like refrigerator stickers, clothes-hangers and tea and biscuits on a sunmica table acquire a whole new meaning. It’s the eye for these details that matter: the salesman wearing the jacket wrong side around to ensure the white shirt doesn’t get dirty, tucking the trousers with a pin before riding off on his scooter and safely putting the tie in the shirt pocket while lunching […] the kind [of film] which is very difficult to make given that the office setting is boring, the characters humdrum, the theme unexciting, the drama is all about bonuses, profits, targets, commissions, quotations and balance-sheets.[^3]

Much like the objects, these insignificant habitual and material trivialities qualify the film in the reviewer’s eyes as marking “a continuum and a departure from the middle-class cinema of Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Basu Chatterjee and Sai Paranjpye.” The triumvirate cited in the review had managed to capture an order of middle class existence in the mundane realism of ordinariness in its characterization and situations that the middle class of the 1970s could identify with. But this comparison also opens up certain important entry points into the implications of several formal and generic elements that had germinated in the relatively democratized field of production (which is nonetheless constricted in

[^3]: Namrata Joshi, review, see footnote 12 above.
terms of its viewing constituency) in the era of the multiplex. Given that the idiom that constitutes the density of details in the film also to a large extent determines its subject matter, a telling departure can be read off the faults which the same review locates in the film. Where the film falls short of fulfilling its potential as a “more subversive” “truly indie effort”, writes Joshi, is in its “first half [that] takes far too long to set up the characters. The end is also stretched and too nice.” It might be more productive here to read a dichotomy between precisely these two features in the film to frame an argument about the possibilities of a mode of address pertinent for addressing the complexities of middle class existence in the contemporary context. The everyday materiality of the interior spaces of Harpreet’s lived world of insignificant objects painstakingly caught in extreme exaggerated close-ups on the one hand and the acts of manipulation and deceit that he is tutored into at his workplace on the other are perhaps not of the same order within the narrative economy of the film. The first performs ordinariness as much as the ingenious casting of budding starlet Ranbir Kapoor as a nondescript turbanned young Sardarji or that of the erstwhile flamboyant villain Prem Chopra as his aging grandfather does.

The review argues that through the set of everyday pragmatics Rocket Singh represents the encounter of an older modular middle class ethics with the pervasive impersonal and amoral traffic of commerce, the thrill of targets and profits so to speak. But there is, even within the new economic alignment, a marked difference posited by the film between the ways of corruption and the personalized efficient commerce that its ordinary hero Harpreet introduces.

In one sense, Harpreet has already, in his very characterization, overhauled the ’70s middle class protagonist. Harpreet with a 39% score in B.Com chooses a career in sales to best exploit his skills in “conversation, persuasion, negotiation” (words that he himself uses to describe his skills to his bookish cousin to argue why he lacks the aptitude to pursue the usual career in engineering or management that would ensure him a secure job in the U.S.) and in this he is already closer to the characters that present calculating, astute foils to the ordinary middle class heroes of a previous era (in being closer to Vashu than P. Joshi in Paranjpye’s 1982 film Katha, for example).
The allegedly distended first half of the film that introduces characters in Harpreet’s workplace also introduces some new ethical impediments to Harpreet and he registers shock at the acts of deceit and manipulation that prevail at his workplace. This incessant shock of the unexpected and the amoral for Harpreet as the newest salesman in a computer sales and servicing firm are strung together humorously in successive events. His immediate boss, Nitin, a relatively jaded senior salesman walks him through the routine on Harpreet’s first training day: he bribes a doorman for information, wheedles information out of the secretary of a potential client by letting her believe that he is helplessly enamoured with her, cuts off a young rival representative from another company on their way up in the elevator, peers surreptitiously into contending tenders from another firm in the client’s office and plays on his insecurities to get an order. The first crucial disruption in this routine happens when Harpreet files a complaint on his firm’s letterhead against a senior buying officer in another firm when he asks Harpreet for a substantial cut.

As an aside, the narrative build-up of these serially organized encounters are in a way reminiscent, though never as fatalistic in tone, of those faced by the young jobless protagonist Somnath in Satyajit Ray’s Jana Aranya (1976) where, as yet another hapless young graduate, he follows a tout into the underbelly of the city defying middle class inhibitions and respectability. But how exactly is Harpreet different from Somnath who is also negotiating an alien topoi from the grounded perspective of a middle class apprehending redundancy in the new traffic of commerce and moral solvency? The difference possibly lies in the very possibility and nature of reclamation of this space that Rocket Singh posits. It is in the film’s emphatic investment in Harpreet’s naïve belief that a different norm exists and is only waiting to be instituted. The framed image of Guru Nanak is curiously foregrounded, resurfacing from the inventory of everyday objects at his home as the symbolic bearer of Harpreet’s moral compass, and lends an affective charge to his actions. Harpreet by this time has floated his own company on the sly by using the infrastructure, resources and client list of the firm where he is employed. Burdened by his cumulative guilt Harpreet can no longer bear to look at the
picture of the prophet. The rerun episodes of Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana* that Harpreet’s grandfather keeps watching on television are given a similar function to ground the moral economy of the bygone era of his grandfather, and Harpreet faced with the lack of ethical options open to him constantly interjects about their redundancy as no one seems to (be able to) live by those edicts anymore. *Rocket Singh* in its redemptive second half manages a fantastic melodramatic mélange between an efficient new personalized service economy and individual entrepreneurship on the one hand, and the ethical framework required to place the middle class at its helm on the other.

Thus, some of the characteristics of these films (in terms of character delineation, modes of representation) of what can be tendentially called the middle class cinema of the 1990s, in terms of either their subject matter or the socio-economic and cultural co-ordinates of their intended audience, would produce unmistakable semblances (pointing to a continuity referred to in the review as well) with certain precepts of the middle class cinema of the ’70s.

Of the representational strategies and tendencies in the cinema that developed over this time period, I isolate three major tendencies for our perusal as being intimately related to the processes of spatial segregation and which work towards preserving a safe haven for the middle class. The first set of films, by Madhur Bhandarkar, self-consciously and self-righteously produces a framework for reading urban space by actually and unambiguously verbalizing the anxieties of a middle class under siege. The second set, Ram Gopal Varma’s horror films, points to certain anxieties around the impregnability of the gated communities of the upwardly mobile section of the populace: anxieties that insinuate themselves into the body of the film, even when the films do not narratively address them. A third tendency, represented by *Delhi 6* (*Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2009*), which I will take up in the concluding section of this chapter, actively proposes resolutions to the crises manifest in the first and second set of films above. The specific way in which urban space is apprehended and interpreted in *Delhi 6*, I argue, makes its proposed interventions and resolutions thinkable, and firmly places the new middle class protagonist as the sole possible agent for the changes so effected.
Before I go on to look at the films in closer detail, let me outline some of the concerns that have dominated Urban Studies in the field of representation of the city. Balshaw and Kennedy point out that the city as an object of analysis has been “demythologized and positioned as a site of spatial formations produced across diverse discursive regimes and everyday practices,”\textsuperscript{115} reframing questions of “identity, location, positionality, territoriality, diaspora and interstitiality.”\textsuperscript{116}

In my analysis, I will primarily focus on the first four of these categories, which will be of crucial importance in the formation of the subject position of the spectator, i.e. viewer embedded in the text, or as the subject position that is produced by the cinematic text itself. Rather than look at the spaces in which the narratives unfold at given, or face value, I will try to look at the possible implications of the “instrumentality of space as a register not only of built forms but also of embedded ideologies” where it accrues “particular, localized meanings” as a “social entity.”\textsuperscript{117} In other words, how one reads the city, inhabits it, and in terms of cinematic representation—how the city is made legible on screen, in the way it is constructed and the terms of access or intervention it allows—is inextricably related to the position one occupies as a socially embedded entity. I argue that the entry points offered to the textual spectator in effect produces, as well as limits, possibilities of any semiosis by facilitating or thwarting class affinities or more complex positional affinities. I look for textual traces in the films I discuss and try to isolate the affiliations and affinities they strike with other discursive models of looking at the Indian metropolis and its implicit boundaries.

However, for a further caveat to qualify the various strategies of representation it will be useful to consider here a binary that Martin Lefebvre establishes between ‘landscape’ and ‘setting’ in the field of pictorial representation in the Western canon. According to Lefebvre, ‘setting,’ even when at the level of content, may

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid. p. 2
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid. p. 2
actually show a panoramic landscape (or in our case a cityscape), its function is essentially that of “the natural exterior [or interior] context for an action or event.” “It is the place where something happens, where something takes place and unfolds […] especially in] narrative cinema [which is] based on the depiction of actions and events.” 118 The space depicted thus is rendered subordinate to the narratological drive. This might also suggest, following Lefebvre’s argument that ‘landscape’ when autonomous from the imperatives of narrative grounding slants more towards an aesthetic impulse while ‘setting’ gravitates to narrative containment of space. The spectacular and narrative modes so set out by Lefebvre are “likely [to] come into play at different moments.” 119 In this tension between the two, “[t]he interruption of the narrative by contemplation has the effect of isolating the object of the gaze, by momentarily freeing it from the narrative function […] the contemplation of filmic spectacle depends on an “autonomizing” gaze […] which] enables the notion of filmic landscape in narrative fiction (and event based documentary) film; it makes possible the transition from setting to landscape.” 120 Lefebvre thus fixes the landscape in a veritable temporal suspension or stasis. The aesthetic charge of the landscape is thus mobilized by the spectator in the caesura of narrative progression by the spectator’s errant eye in acts of fleeting to the landscape.

As an aside, Lefebvre’s objective here is to accord a degree of autonomy to the landscape in the cinema while placing it squarely within the spectacle-narrative binary formulated by Laura Mulvey. This isolated focus on the landscape as informed by the history of landscape painting limits landscape to exterior spaces depicting natural scenery. Lefebvre also seems to hold landscape as the untainted space in which an artist’s individuality finds the greatest freedom of expression relatively unaffected by formal or tactical concerns (even those imposed by the conditions of its execution, for example, the control of the draughtsman’s grid, one might argue). Elsewhere he negates even this line of argument to propose the imaginative portent of reception, which might contradict the intention of the artist,
as the sole locus of the autonomy of the landscape thus introducing a slippage between the autonomy of the landscape and its reception guided by aesthetic concerns alone. Since discursive contextualization, to Lefebvre, restricts the interpretive possibilities of the landscape, he prefers to emphasize its autonomy rather than interrogating and expanding the scope of reading landscape as (an art historical) form. To end his argument, Lefebvre thus differentiates the sense of territoriality (arising from the experience of lived space or from purposes of military excursions or governance) from the aesthetic concerns of landscape *per se*. In this, our position is closer to Willemen’s where he cites Raymond Williams, who in turn invokes Brecht, to propose a ‘complex seeing’ as “the reading of landscape within the diagésis as itself a layered set of discourses, as a text in its own right.”  

I would therefore foreground the function of the spectator’s errant eye that releases the ‘impure landscape’ for which “[t]he first condition is elsewhere, in the spectator’s gaze, which is to say in their cultural knowledge and sensibility.” This allows us to expand the understanding of landscape to also include the city spaces in our discussion.

As we shall see in the two sections that follow, for Bhandarkar, the mode of representation is subsumed by the narrative and plot content where anxieties around city spaces primarily differentiated by class are interpreted as moral otherness. Whereas for Ram Gopal Varma, representation follows what we might call an aesthetics of dread in which spaces operate autonomously in the sense that in excess to the demands of the narrative they internalize and manifest symptoms of unease about the city that are elided altogether on the level of characters and events in the film. This is also where the function of Lefebvre’s errant eye sensitive to ‘cultural knowledge’ and ‘sensibility’ become especially meaningful. Whereas Bhandarkar consciously evokes and mobilizes a middle class sensibility as the vantage point from which the milieus and spaces are to be read, in Varma’s films they form the unacknowledged discursive framework that generate the sense of dread.

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122 Lefebvre ‘Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema’ p. 51
IV ‘Realistic’ Cinema or the Refurbished Social

Madhur Bhandarkar insists on his status as a maker of ‘realistic films.’ In Fashion (2008), two models conversing backstage speculate on what Bhandarkar (appearing as himself in a cameo) is doing talking to a fashion designer. They say “iye realistic filmmakers fashion ki duniya ko bhi nahin chhorenge.” (These realistic filmmakers will not let even the world of fashion alone).

Bhandarkar says in an interview, "My movies are not exposés, maybe they just hold up a mirror to society. My movies are not judgmental; I just show what happens in our society, sometimes there could be a solution and sometimes there may be none."[123]

Bhandarkar’s claims for a ‘realistic’ cinema articulated through this peculiar suffix is premised on providing a window into the world of the underprivileged sections of society as in the case of Chandni Bar (2001) and Traffic Signal (2007). The window to the real is nonetheless qualified in each case by an apologia or a disclaimer of sorts provided which explains Bhandarkar’s intentions at the very beginning of the film. In Chandni Bar the introductory message to the audience says:

This film is dedicated to the thousands of girls who earn their living dancing in bars. Through this film we wanted to portray their struggle for survival. We have no intention to demean or insult their profession or their lifestyle, [italics mine] we respect these girls and appreciate their struggle for sustenance through this profession.

Whereas in Traffic Signal it says:

This film is dedicated to the multitudes of people working at the traffic signals in the country…We do not intend to demean, mock, ridicule or make value judgments on the professions or lifestyles [italics mine] of these people…As a matter of fact we are genuinely moved and overawed

by the grit and determination shown by these people in their day to day struggle for survival at the traffic signals…”

Clearly, the statements are intended to pre-empt the possibilities of contrary interpretations of the film that might lead to an uncharitable evaluation of its subjects, but the questions that this act might produce as well are: if the films themselves might have prompted such readings and how, what exactly constitutes the normative criteria for any possible judgement, and what compliance between the presumptions of the film and its projected audience might corroborate such judgement. The repeated invocation of the word ‘lifestyles’ and its implication of choice applied to the conditions of life of the protagonists in both cases also perhaps incline towards a middle class outlook caught by Leela Fernandes where the lower classes are ontologically attributed with an aversion to utilize the opportunities for upward mobility arising from their preference to continue living in squalor.124

An additional charge of the ‘realistic’ derives from the familiarizing link with reality in the films which are provided by building the narrative around incidents that have in fact been in the headlines (for instance the Coke-Pepsi rivalry that was translated into the rivalry between two competing soft drink companies in Corporate, 2006, or several news stories about cocaine addiction in the film and fashion industry that go into Fashion, 2008.)

Formally too, the ‘realistic’ in Bhandarkar’s films, in terms of circumventing the spectacular song and dance sequences of mainstream Bollywood that arrest or disrupt the narrative flow, make a strategic compromise whereby ‘item numbers’ are placed within the film at parties (in Page 3 and Corporate) thus diagnostically incorporated within the text and simultaneously drawing attention to their status as culturally spurious, tasteless insertions. Other songs are overlaid as commentary

124 For Example, see Leela Fernandes: “As one middle class public-sector employee put it, “These people [pavement dwellers] will never change. Even if you give them a free house they will sell it and go back to the footpath.”” These constructions, argues Fernandes, rely on the notion that “the poor choose their poverty and are essentially unwilling to work in order to gain social mobility.” India’s New Middle Class, p.185.
or exegesis on the image track as supplementary narrative devices. This is an element which, while also borrowing from the stylized rhetoric of the music video, would come of its own in Anurag Basu’s *Life in a...Metro*, 2007, for instance, where a rock band led by singer/composer Pritam Chakraborty appears in the space of the city side by side with the protagonists at important narrative junctures. The commentating function there, in conjunction with the diagnostically incongruous foregrounding of the band, work against both the conventional song and dance sequences of the more prominent mainstream as well as the kind of realistic impetus it might have had for Bhandarkar. But it also points to the unpredictable trajectories and afterlives that incipient generic elements arising from the curious cultural conglomeration that followed the globalization of Indian airspace would have within the cinematic form.

Bhandarkar’s proclamation for ‘realistic’ cinema in a way also resuscitates an earlier moment in the history of Indian cinema where middle class cinema was in the process of being constituted with its own idioms of realism in tandem with two other tendencies that Madhava Prasad distinguishes as a ‘progressive realism’ “political in its choice of themes” and “focusing attention on the poor and exploited” and the other project, most explicit in the films of Satyajit Ray, which was committed to a nation building project with its “cultural expression in a realist portrayal of the nation in cinema.” The middle class cinema germinating in this period would be premised on this “cinema of identification based on realist principles.” The larger implication, and of course the imperative, to consolidate such a middle class cinema arose from the necessity of establishing a middle class hegemony that would represent in one trajectory of films the class’s national profile, indeed its class identity, and in the other trajectory, “its reformist role in the drama of class and religious conflicts within the nation state.”

Prasad shows how in *Guddi* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1971), which critiques the illusory world of cinema and its fascination, authenticity and narrative integrity were trenchantly operative as the parameters of realism. Bhandarkar establishes

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126 Ibid. p.162.
127 Ibid. p.163.
his distinctive role as the purveyor of ‘realistic’ cinema hinged on the 
remobilization of several of these concerns.

Predictably, Bhandarkar won his first National Award in 2002 in the category 
‘Best Film on Other Social Issues’ for *Chandni Bar* (2001). The film is about 
the life of a Muslim small town girl who is forced to migrate to Bombay after her 
family is burnt to death in a riot between Hindus and Muslims in her hometown 
Sitapur in Uttar Pradesh. Living in Bombay with an older man from her 
hometown whom she calls Mamu (uncle) she finds work in a beer-bar dancing to 
Hindi film songs to entertain the clients. She is raped by Mamu one night. 

Traumatized at first by her circumstances, Mumtaz gradually comes to find solace 
and solidarity in the company of her co-workers and marries a client, Totiya, a hot 
headed local hitman. When he is shot in a staged encounter by the police, Mumtaz 
returns to the beer bar.

Mumtaz’s introduction to the poorest neighbourhoods of Bombay—the cramped 
slums with their oppressively narrow alleys and bare brick walls, the sleazy dance 
bars, the city at night outside the sparsely lit doors of the beer bar, at isolated 
roadside shops where clients wait to pick up the girls in their supplementary jobs 
as prostitutes, within the dark tight spaces of autorickshaws or cars or police jeeps 
which come to pick up the girls for sex or to take them to the police station, the 
violence inside police lockups—are all shot in this film in the gritty low lit visual 
style of the gangland Bombay films. Bhandarkar himself, during the making of his 
debut film *Trishakti* (1999), had acknowledged that he learnt technical skills from 
Ram Gopal Varma while assisting him. *Chandni Bar’s* cinematographer Rajeev 
Ravi on the other hand would go on to make films with Anurag Kashyap (*No 
Smoking*, 2007; *Dev D*, 2009; *Gulaal*, 2009) and several regional directors. But 
the film remains significant for introducing Bhandarkar’s *narrative* strategy for 

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128 *Chandni Bar* also won three other national Awards in the categories Best Actress: Tabu for playing Mumtaz, Best Supporting Actor: Atul Kulkarni, Best Supporting Actress: Ananya Khare as well as the IIFA and Zee Cine Award (India) for Best Actress.

While on the one hand it brought to light the travails of the girls performing in beer bars, humanizing their plight, it also presaged, in its particular enframing of space inscribed with moral values, the dance bar debates of 2005 when the state of Maharashtra banned dance performances in 

eating houses, permit rooms and beer bars through an amendment in the Bombay Police Act, 1951.

The objections against the dance bars demanded sanitization of the public domain stressing upon 

the prurience and vulgarity of the performances, and the moral protection of not only minors but 

family men who patronized the dance bars.
capturing a world foreign to the middle class that he would eventually deploy in its rarefied form in his three subsequent films independent of the visual aspect of the kind of realism that would come to be associated with the gangland films and films of urban violence.

For Bhandarkar’s subsequent urban trilogy Page 3 (cinematographed by Madhu Rao who was also Bhandarkar’s cinematographer for Satta and Aan: Men at Work earlier), Corporate and Traffic Signal (both cinematographed by Mahesh Limaye who works for Fashion later), Bhandarkar uses the spoken narrative to frame space making it entirely subservient to the narrative impulse for which several strategies come into play:

First, there is the construction of an exclusive middle class identity, if only in the othering of its identifiable antagonists in terms of class configurations and which in each case also becomes defined as a difference in terms of values, or more emphatically, as a depravation of normative values.

Secondly, Bhandarkar embeds vehicles of spectatorial identification into his films in the form of characters, who would narrativize and vocalize the anxieties of the middle class, most emphatically in the instance of Madhavi in Page 3. Madhavi is the daughter of an army officer from Bangalore who has come to Delhi to be a journalist and is given the page 3 beat to cover, which, as is repeatedly reiterated by several other characters in the film, is a world of superficial encounters and vagaries of the “rich and famous.” In addition to Madhavi’s journal-esque first person account of events and their significance recounted in the past tense, the telling move in Bhandarkar’s case is the incorporation of certain characters (like the two employees in Corporate gossiping on the happenings at the firm as if solely for the camera, who pass judgements on the amount of food and liquor consumed at corporate meetings, on the sexual promiscuity of a woman in their office who has shifted from being a more readily available “public limited” entity to a private limited” mistress for her boss, or about a minister being bribed in the currency of sex with an item girl in a five star hotel) who provide commentary on how to read spaces and individuals and act as dispersed bearers of the spectatorial gaze for which the film is supposedly structured. Corporate, lacking any explicit protagonist to identify with uses an autonomous voice over to explain with
appropriate value judgments the finer nuances and plot twists. Page 3 on the other hand deploys a complex battery of such commentators in the form of a couple of serial gatecrashers at the party, and drivers waiting in the parking lot who tell each other about the idiosyncrasies and infidelities of their employers.

Other non-diabetic directorial interventions proliferate in both Corporate and Page 3 to provide readings of onscreen spaces: in Page 3, in excess to Madhavi’s voiceover, the title song summarizes this alienating world of celebrities and their superficiality and inconstancies.

\[\text{Yahan zindagi ek alag zindagi hai}\]
\[\text{Yahan khwaishen asmaan se badi hai}\]
\[\text{Yahan har jagah mauj hai mastiyaan hai}\]
\[\text{Yahan zamane ki har hastiyan hai}\]

(This life here is a different life/ Ambitions here soar higher than the sky/ Frivolity and decadence reign supreme everywhere here/ This here is where all the luminaries of our times congregate)

The song encapsulates the morality tale—it appears in the film the first time to provide the shock of the difference, accompanied on the visual register with shots of the city and people being groomed for a party later that evening, and subsequently with torsos dancing under strobe lights and celebrities being introduced in the gaps between the verses of the songs, a shipping tycoon, a transvestite fashion designer, the daughter of a famous industrialist, a writer of raunchy pulp fiction (presumably modelled after Shobha De), the head of a security agency, the Assistant Commissioner of Police, a member of the parliament, a social worker who runs a Non Governmental Organisation for street children, et al. The song will return once more at the very end of the film when Madhavi is entirely disillusioned, and more crucially at the middle for a short lived resolution following Pearl’s (Madhavi’s airhostess flatmate who is looking for a millionaire husband) romantic liaison with an aged hotelier, the man she will eventually marry. The three women Madhavi, Pearl and Gayatri (a naïve aspiring actress) in this segment are apparently finally at equilibrium within a hostile cynical city which itself is transformed into assuring spaces for the three couples:
their apartments, the beach, Madhavi commuting on the train smiling and talking on the phone with Taran (an aspiring model), and Gayatri at the apartment of her boyfriend Rohit, the Bollywood star. But the moment will soon be disrupted by subsequent events that unfold, not so much for the other two girls (Pearl has already made the practical compromise and Gayatri too will be ‘corrupted’ after a devastating betrayal by Rohit), but for Madhavi, the central carrier of spectatorial identification in the film.

Thirdly, spaces as ‘settings’ in Bhandarkar are produced around, and are denominationally associated with and qualified by characters: panoramic shots of the city are inserted only as extra narrative punctuations between events unfolding in the film. In Corporate, the opening sequence shows a press conference where a minister introduces a Public Sector Unit (which the rival houses will bid for), the camera focuses individually on the characters of the film in the audience and once the setting is established captures in tight frontal close-ups conversations that establish various character traits and flaws. The subsequent settings, posh apartments and houses, the minister’s office, boardrooms, golf courses, squash courts, clubs, five-star restaurants, boutiques and shops (often carrying prominent brand names, like Allen Solly in Corporate and Satya Paul in Page 3) are demarcated essentially as othered spaces—sites of dubious transactions—and are marked by their unacceptability to the middle class protagonists. In Corporate, Megha, a young intern, for instance, is shown celebrating her first paycheck by treating her parents to dinner at a five star restaurant where in a chance encounter her bosses tell her that it is a lifestyle she’ll soon have to get used to. Her father meanwhile agitates over the price of regular fare like paneer tikka, dal tadka, roti and says “itna paneer to hum mahine bhar mein ghar mein nahin khaate” (But we don’t go through this much paneer even in an entire month at home).

The topography of the city, however, radically changes for Madhavi in Page 3 once she crosses over to the ‘real world’ and ‘real journalism’ accompanying Vinayak, the crime reporter, from her newspaper on his beat—“humlog story ke liye Mumbai ke kisi bhi gali mohalle mein pauch jaate the” (for stories we’d turn up at most any lane, any locality in Mumbai). Meeting her at a hospital late at
night after Gayatri’s suicide attempt, Vinayak tells her that this is where the “real stories” are. The camera subsequently captures them, as Vinayak introduces her to his contacts and informers, at chawls, slums, on public buses, in street-side tea-shops, and at the police station. The initiation culminates when they witness a bomb blast in the city, when the camera takes an aerial shot of the scene and closes in on bloodied victims writhing in agony on the street. The shots begin with a bombardment of images of violently mauled bodies missing limbs and then distend into slow motion tinted in red. A distorted chorus of wails wavers on the soundtrack as people are carried away on stretchers and in auto rickshaws to the hospital. The incident literally and effectively shatters the carefully staged illusory other world of celebrities for Madhavi once she returns to cover the page 3 beat and ends up confronting the Assistant Commissioner of Police at the party for his indifference and irresponsibility to the people under his jurisdiction who have fallen victim to the explosions. At the narratorial level, Madhavi’s potential conjugal unit explodes when she accidentally discovers Taran at his apartment in the middle of a sexual encounter with their mutual friend Abhijit. The city experientially becomes a more visceral intervention into the film around Madhavi after this point as she is shown for the first time walking down the street, framed by the fumes of cooking from a street vendor’s frying pan in the foreground, and subsequently seeks shelter in an autorickshaw where she breaks down into sobs. For the first time the wind on the train on her daily commute physically hits her unsettling her hair.

Fourthly, ironically thus, the very city which provided the ideal locale for the formation of the new couple unmoored from the repressive gaze of the feudal in an earlier phase of middle class cinema becomes, for Bhandarkar, the space in which it is impossible to establish any familial or conjugal bonds. The family is also crucially the unit under threat in each film. Narrative disruptions and resolutions are defined in terms of the consolidation or disruption of families, both Nishi and Madhavi (in Corporate and Page 3) respectively, are unable to finally establish or sustain themselves as part of a couple.
Especially as if to emphasize the point about the erosion of the family the dealings of the corporate world between two warring rival business houses are envisaged in terms of a feud between two families headed by patriarchs: Marwah’s traditional family which depends on astrological predictions made by a spiritual adviser Devi Bapu on the one hand, and Sehgal’s relatively ‘modern’ but dysfunctional family on the other. Sehgal has an extramarital affair with the television talk show host Devyani, and his brother in law Ritesh who has just returned from London after a few abortive business enterprises is in the process of being drawn back into the domain of the family through his incorporation into the newest business venture of the Sehgal group of companies.

The commentaries provided by the drivers and the two clerks at the office are almost always without fail about marital infidelity “wohan shopping kam or swapping zada hota hai” (there’s less shopping and more swapping happening out there). A starlet in Page 3 talks to her cricketer boyfriend away on a trip on the phone while asking her makeup man to cover up a love-bite on her body. Anjali, the socialite with the NGO, is perpetually agonizing over the excessive freedom and license that her wayward daughter seems to be taking and finally commits suicide when she finds out that her husband has been sexually abusing the street children sheltered by her NGO.

Fifthly, the middle class as the repository and the last bastion of any possible cultural capital for the nation is entrenched at several points in Page 3 and there is a constant strain of anxiety expresses over the erosion of cultural values in the face of commerce: Madhavi, for example, is chided by her editor for wasting 500 words of print on a painter with no achievements or bank balance. The vernacular and the local (marked out and territorialized as belonging firmly to the terrain of middle class sensibility), are posited against the corrupting influence of English and Westernization. A khadi clad aged journalist from a vernacular daily laments at a film set about how he is not granted interviews in spite of having twice the circulation of the unfairly privileged English newspapers. In another instance a local police inspector Bhonsle, while raiding a ‘drug party,’ confronts a cigarette smoking young woman who calls him a “ghaatii” by responding “What do you think, we cops are vernaculars? We don’t understand English? We don’t have
civic sense? We are uncivilized people? […] First try to be a good cultured Indian. Then try to be Western.” Values and sensibilities, summarized as ethics, are accorded a class identity.

Sixthly, the ‘reformist role’ of the protagonists by extension is translated into the critical gaze and interpretation of these commentating characters in the films and is more importantly invested in the expository interventions undertaken by Madhavi even within the ambit of her page 3 columns. It is also presumably a self-reflexive comment on the role Bhandarkar assigns to his own films which replicate the expository gaze of news television by bringing instances of corruption (and moral deviance in Bhandarkar’s case) out in the public domain in the manner of the hidden camera introduced first by Tehelka. But in privileging narratives manipulated to show precisely those failings of the corporate or glamour worlds which threaten thrift, family values, culture, education, or in other words, the defining attributes of the middle class in the earlier modular phase of middle class cinema, Bhandarkar self-proclaimedly places himself at an advantage over the print or audio visual media where the production of news is shown to be susceptible to the workings of vested dealings in a nexus between money and politics. In Page 3 itself, on the one hand, Anjali, the socialite who runs an NGO speaks superlatively of Vinayak’s work in crime reportage as something that creates awareness. On the other, Madhavi’s story on Anjali’s social work with street children is perceived as bringing about actual change and altering social reality by reforming and cleansing the system (two of the children are adopted after Madhavi’s story comes out in print). As such, Bhandarkar’s realistic cinema is also self-differentiated from the illusory placating world of make believe of mainstream cinema and the media in general: an opinion echoed by Vinayak when he tells Madhavi that she is deluded to think of her work as journalism when it is merely entertainment.

V Paranoid Densities
Ram Gopal Varma, originally from the Telegu film industry, made his entry into Bombay with the huge commercial success of Rangeela in 1995. Varma’s first film Shiva (1989) made in Telegu deals with violence in student politics and
prefigures the gangland films not only in the depiction of relentless visceral violence but also in its editing and shooting techniques, such as the use of Steadicam for its chase sequences. Varma’s métier with the underworld gangland films however, cited by Danny Boyle as one of his prime influences in understanding Bombay for their “brutality” and “urban violence,” was established with Satya (1998) with a script written by Anurag Kashyap and Saurabh Shukla and original music by Vishal Bhardwaj and Sandeep Chowta. The fortuitous concurrence of Anurag Kashyap and Vishal Bhardwaj for Satya would prove to be consequential in their later work as directors in the way they would reinvent the visual rhetoric and narrative elements inaugurated by Satya. Kashyap, while prolifically successful in writing script and dialogue for several films by Varma, Mani Ratnam, Deepa Mehta and sundry would go on to experiment with contestatory styles of film making in his own oeuvre. Bhardwaj would inflect the gangland genre with epic overtones in his adaptations of Shakespeare in Maqbool (2003, based on Macbeth) and Omkara (2006, based on Othello) respectively.

Varma’s own subsequent work as director and later as producer with the inception of the Ram Gopal Varma Film Factory can be loosely categorized into three thematic directions: the gangland films that were inaugurated with Satya, the films that deal with the glamour of the film industry, and the films of urban horror (within which one can also accommodate the psychological thrillers, road movies and the occasional horror film located in the isolated cottage, resort or woodland as exploring the limits and the precariousness of an urban, purportedly upper class, mode of existence.)

To understand Varma’s third trajectory of urban horror films and their representation of the urban, where spaces are infiltrated and inscribed with violent eruptions of everyday anxieties generated by urban habitation, it is necessary to introduce the concept of ‘paranoid spatiality’ discussed by Liam Kennedy in the context of certain tendencies in American cinema. This particular idiom of representation, Kennedy argues, is coterminous with the creation of the new city

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line with its ‘inward turning shopping mall, the indoor ‘atriums’ of corporate office buildings, the proliferation of theme parks and ‘festival market places,’ all being places which are rigorously disciplined through practices of gating, signage and surveillance. It is an aesthetic that denotes an escapist and exclusionary urbanism in which ‘form follows fear’ as much as it follows finance, and the privatization of space is dependent upon externalized ‘others,’ often identified with the street.”

For Ram Gopal Varma the protagonists besieged by invasions from the outside belong precisely to the urban demographic who can lay claim to these fortified but threatened territories on the emergent. While the city space is increasingly claimed in the form of sanitized, manicured, insulated and controlled interiors (including public spaces like the mall, shops and offices) by the relatively affluent, the outside, the underclass, variously perceived ‘otherness’ and abjection as a bodily state, insinuate themselves through chinks and cracks in the body of the film in surreptitious coups.

Taking Bhoot (1993) as representative of Varma’s horror films I focus not on its storyline about a haunting but rather on the threat of imminent violence internalized in the mode of representation itself as a kind of dread, or fear with no identifiable object.

In Bhoot, a fairly affluent professional Vishal rents a duplex apartment for him and his wife Swati in spite of the fact that a young woman Manjit and her son had plummeted to death from the balcony of the same apartment and that other prospective clients have been reluctant to consider living in it for this reason. Swati subsequently suffers from increasing psychological unrest and ‘hallucinations’ in the form of apparitions of the deceased woman. When doctors are unable to prescribe a cure, Swati is presumed to be possessed by the spirit of the dead woman.

But even as the narrative emphatically and repeatedly stresses on that other register of knowledge and phenomena inapprehensible to either science qua medicine or the law (the doctors are unable to provide a cure even as the

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130 Liam Kennedy, ‘Paranoid Spatiality: Postmodern Urbanism and American Cinema’ in Urban Space and Representation, eds. Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy, 2000, p. 117
prognosis stands that she is suffering from a severe trauma caused by the knowledge of Manjit’s death; in the climactic end to the film, police inspector Qureishi investigating the murder is finally awed and overwhelmed by the sight of Sanjay, Manjit’s killer, held aloft in thin air by a vengeful supernatural force wrangling a confession for his dual murders out of him) the visual and aural registers that the film deploys to represent the space inhabited by the couple and the impending threats to their existence belie this conviction.

That the film does not even want you to entertain the half-heartedly offered rational scientific explanations or leave any room for ambiguity regarding the fact of the possession is amply evident from the appearance of the spectre of the ghosts of Manjit and her son that appear in frames independently of any necessity of a hallucinating gaze to produce them, i.e. they are configured autonomously within the body of the film (in at least two clear instances the little boy’s ghost standing midway on the stairs looks around directly at the camera, and by extension at us, and in another stares at the closed door of the flat after Vishal and Swati have walked in).

The symptoms manifest in the film clearly betray a larger malady at bay for the couple unmoored from bonds of kinship, thrown into complete anonymity in a city which offers little respite in the form of any safe refuge even in the most intimate of spaces i.e. the conjugal home. The city is defamiliarized and made apparitional and ghostly from the very opening shot onto which the titles roll as the camera giddily sways through the city streets, blurring in and out of focus, especially as it focuses hesitantly on a garbage dump and moves alongside a handheld wheelbarrow almost as if anticipating the imminent threat from the untamable and disorderly peripheries of the city. In accordance with the visual, blaring horns and traffic sounds are distorted to jar and unsettle whatever familiarity one may project onto a predictable urban soundtrack. Both strains, visual and aural, of defamiliarization and shock will continue and get increasingly accentuated throughout the course of the film. Once the titles are done rolling, the camera pans up the steep side of the building, and cuts to show a tight and sharp drop, shot from the balcony at the top. Vishal gets out of the building in the deafening sound of pouring rain, gets into his parked car and slams the door to shut out the sound of the invasive rain outside, the sound of which is now muffled.
The film henceforth would continually accentuate the binary between the threatening outside and the secure, if imperfectly and perpetually under threat, indoor spaces. The film is carefully constructed to show the couple in every single sequence in tight claustrophobic shots within the indoor spaces in which they are always hemmed in, dominated—framed within the looming architecture of their posh duplex apartment or dwarfed by the ominous foregrounding of innocuous objects (a lamp, the wheeled base of a computer chair) which constitute their everyday lived space.

On the soundtrack, audio effects infiltrate and besiege their living space. The moment Vishal leaves for his office on their first morning in the new apartment, a non-diagetic rattling sound begins to accompany Swati as she carries her morning cup of tea or coffee to the living room sofa (followed by shots Vishal revving his car out of an empty sterile parking lot lit like a crypt; there is a remarkable absence of other people in the couple’s life—neighbours, colleagues, friends, family—that points to an extreme isolation of the couple who are to be soon disenfranchised even from the space that they are entitled to). The next extreme low angle shot shows Swati in the kitchen, a huge fan rolling overhead to a sound that is to become part of Swati’s blighted space, and could only possibly be compared to the buzz created by a swarming infestation of locusts or bees. It is the fan that is making the sound and Swati, climbing on a stool to take a closer look at the fan, finds a doll abandoned on the top of the kitchen cabinet, as the ghost of the little boy looks on. After this first visitation Swati, alone in the apartment again, looks into the living room mirror making scary faces at herself, when the doorbell blares loudly and suddenly, it turns out to be the bai. Quite literally, it seems, “[i]n spite of attempts to fashion an impermeable cloistered space, a summons from without, such as an insistently ringing doorbell, cannot be exorcised simply by being ignored.” 131 Tom Gunning recalls Walter Benjamin’s observations in this context—“This new interior betrays signs of the previous violence of demarcation by which the interieur and its privileges were claimed.” “[T]he creation of the interior as a radical separation from the exterior, as a home

131 Tom Gunning, ‘The Exterior as Intérieur: Benjamin’s Optical Detectives’ in boundary 2 30:1, 2003, p. 106
in which the bourgeois can dwell and dream undisturbed by the noise, activity and threats of the street, the space of the masses and of production, a private individual divorced from the community […] ultimately cannot withstand the exterior; it can only transform the nature of its looming invasion optically. While the aural summons of the doorbell cannot be successfully ignored, the inhabitant of the interior can still optically dominate the exterior through a “window mirror,” which accedes to the outside “only as the semblance of things.” It is primarily the Möbius-strip-like contiguity of the interior and exterior aspired to by the modified city and its mirroring surfaces of chrome and glass that is constantly thwarted in the film in which sharp disjunctive interruptions keep being driven between the two kinds of space. It is the trace of the outside (the contaminating past) that is misrecognized by Swati as she picks up and cuddles the doll left behind in the apartment by its former inhabitants. The optical trace or invasion that Swati apprehends as she looks in the mirror is not actualized but only displaced elsewhere.

These repeated red herrings building up anxiety also act to draw our attention to the plethora of more tangible worldly threats to the couple’s living space that the narrative itself insinuates, but eventually sidesteps. Even though the use of such typical devices to produce visceral shock can be located firmly within the conventions of the generic horror film, especially Hollywood, that Varma liberally borrows from, it is the elements onto which terror is delegated or displaced in the process of translating or fragmentarily adapting the film to an appropriately Indian context for the purpose of deferring the terror of the ‘supernatural’ that become our focal point here. In Vaastu Shastra (2004, Saurabh Narang, produced by Ram Gopal Varma) for example, another narrative about a suburban home haunted by several malevolent spirits, a little barefooted man crusted with dirt repeatedly accosts the woman whose family is under threat, even hysterically throwing himself at her car. That the woman she hires as domestic help and to look after her son abuses and terrorizes the boy in her absence and steals objects from the

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132 Ibid. p. 107
household is also a fact that the audience alone has access to for a significant
duration into the film.

In Bhoot, the most obvious bearers of a similar threat from the underclass pressing
upon the fortified household of the couple are the characters of the watchman and the bai. The watchman is eventually killed by Swati possessed by the ghost of Manjit for being an accessory to the murder which had originally initiated the chain of events in the narrative. But the representational framing of both the watchman and the bai posit them as potential sexual predators infiltrating into the private space of the couple. Vishal makes a complaint about the repeated misdemeanours of the watchman to the landlord after having confronted him once for his lack of respect, and Swati finds him repeatedly appearing inside their apartment. The anxiety produced on screen through editing each time shows the watchman’s empty chair by the lift downstairs leading us to speculate upon the harm he might be causing elsewhere; in one instance Vishal rushes up to the apartment in the clear apprehension that the watchman has made his way into their apartment. The bai in contrast has mannerisms and a general bodily languor inexplicably in excess to the demands of her character, and the camera repeatedly captures her as she performs her daily labour of wet-swiping the floor in low angle shots which sway to and fro with her movements.

Peopled outside spaces in the city appear twice in the film in the form of a multiplex movie theatre and Juhu beach where the couple go for an outing. Ironically in the multiplex, Swati suddenly finds that the audience is looking back at her, instead of the screen, with utter horror inscribed upon their faces and sees that she is alone in the now deserted theatre with Manjit’s ghost and the bai who smiles at her and says her day’s work is done. The beach too is suddenly deserted in her hallucination when she runs away from the sight of Manjit’s ghost advancing towards her. Fear and the response to it as the increasing compulsion to reduce contact with anonymous strangers and the nameless crowds around her propels Swati into this rarefied exteriorized space of her private anxieties made real. Even within their apartment, as her visitations gain in frequency and intensity and Vishal begins to suspect that she has murdered the watchman in a state of
somnambulism, the camera captures the couple as graphically and irreconcilably separated on either side of the screen by the stairs of their duplex, isolated and trapped in their individual private cells.

The film consciously apprehends the architecture as something that will engulf and dominate their conjugal space in subtle to growing certitude. In the very beginning, after having shopped for groceries, Swati returns to the apartment and is informed by the gatekeeper that the lift is not working, so she starts climbing up the stairs, but her sprightliness gives way soon enough, the building had already started to rebel, dwarfing and exhausting her. 133

Of course, as I have already mentioned, Bhoot also freely borrows its visual idioms and plotlines from other films of urban dystopia from Hollywood like The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973) and Sliver (Philip Noyce, 1993). But like the subtexts of these two (of a generational anxiety in the former and the implications of a scopic regime of surveillance cameras and voyeurism that the altered city line offers in the case of the latter) Varma’s possessed women (as also in Phoonk, 2008, where the possessed is literally a child and not an increasingly infantilized woman) are shown as being on the verge of slipping from one order of control to another, of which the latter lies beyond the jurisdiction of science, law, or rationality, and become essentially a feminized other. In Phoonk the woman performing black magic is characterized as a professional whose gestures and expressions are distinctly excessive to the point of being demented and are punctuated with a raucous menacingly loud laugh. In each case the bad feminine is brought back the fold of the good feminine firmly ensconced within the ties of the familial.

Ranjani Mazumdar in her chapter of the lush panoramic interiors of post globalization Bombay cinema comments on the spectral absence of the outside precisely on these terms: “Cinema’s ability to displace external reality creates the possibility for imaginary worlds, which the new family genre taps into, in the current context of urban transformation after globalization. The panoramic interior expresses a crisis of belonging, fear of the street, and the desire for good life—all at once. [italics in the original] In this architectural spectacle of light space, the absence of dark space is significant. The shadows of the uncanny, the fear of the street corner, the overwhelming crowd, the chaos of the marketplace, the violence in the street, and the city of strangers remain just outside, threatening to invade but prevented by the new architectural and design aesthetics of the panoramic interior.” –From Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City, p. 148.
Raj Kumar Kohli, who had established his own franchise as the maker of horror films and television serials in the ’80s and ’90s, in an interview given to *Filmfare* following the release of two big budget horror films *Raat* (Ram Gopal Varma) and *Junoon* (Mahesh Bhatt) in 1992 talks about the viability of the horror film:

“Indian audiences like films about the supernatural. But they have to be mounted well and must have big stars. Otherwise horror films have a limited audience.”

The substance of the horror film, he feels, is in the idea “of a safe middle-class life gone berserk. Horror movies are supposed to help audiences confront their deepest, darkest fears and come to terms with their repressed thoughts and desires —so that they can return to the cocoon like safety of their homes, exorcised of their anxieties.” Kohli also laments that “[i]n India, the few horror films that have been made, follow the formulae of the West, and add a dash of indigenous mumbo jumbo.” The representational devices innovated by Varma’s horror films to articulate the anxieties of a middle class through the depiction of spaces prove, I argue, to override their function as ‘settings’ to the supernatural and can thus be carried over to the psychological thrillers depicting the same milieu.

Jijy Philip, who had worked with Varma as chief assistant director on *Bhoot* (as well as in *Road*, 2002) would make his directorial debut with *My Wife’s Murder* in 2006, financed by Anil Kapoor Film Company. It is interesting to observe how all these processes of othering and textual signs of dread continue to operate in this film with no supernatural explanation whatsoever.

**VI Spatiality and Control: the Eye/I of Reform**

*Delhi 6* (2009, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra) delineates urban lived spaces on the axes of practices of the secular and the religious, the mythical and the banal-profane every day, anxieties and the curative. I will attempt to address the terms of production of these binaries in the way they operate to produce the particularities of contemporary Indian space, specifically in terms of their cinematic representation through which spaces are understood, accessed,

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134 ‘Night of the Living Dead’ in *Filmfare*, November 1992, p. 45
135 Ibid. p.42.
136 Ibid. p.45.
experienced and claimed on metaphorical, emotional, cultural and social registers grounding and validating identities and norms of inhabiting the city.

To establish the terrain under consideration it is necessary to note that Delhi 6 is narrated (in the form of a spoken voiceover intermittently overlaid on the visual track) from the point of view its young protagonist Roshan, born of a Hindu father and a Muslim mother who have immigrated to America. He comes home with his terminally ill grandmother to an old neighbourhood in Delhi (area code being 6, hence the name). In his primary encounter this space unfolds in an experiential overdrive for Roshan: narrow lanes, curious and invasive neighbours, overlapping terraces, porous architecture, communal and gendered spaces. These territorialities and collectivities are densely infested with residual symptoms of a ‘pre-modern’ as it appears to Roshan (while Roshan is taking his grandmother to the hospital on a rickshaw after she has just had a stroke, he is frustrated by the suspension of traffic caused by a sacred cow, ‘gomata,’ giving birth. While he gets involved in altercations with a sadhu dispensing blessed flowers, he finds his grandmother has gotten off the rickshaw to seek its blessings.)

For a greater access into the categories that must be established to understand the film one must note that the film borrows from the monkeyman cases of May 2002 where reports of successive nocturnal attacks by a mysterious monkey like apparition (a “creature variously described as a “half-monkey, half-man”, “a strange creature with a machine-like body with glowing lights” and in some cases, a “man with a mask”\(^{137}\)) crystallized a host of anxieties around it within and outside Delhi. To cite one of many examples, the Shiv Sena claimed that it was an infiltration by the Pakistan secret service, the ISI, in the form of 131 monkeys sent from across the border to create terror.

In an essay on the monkeyman cases of 1992 Aditya Nigam quotes an interview given by R. K. Chaturvedi, the Superintendent of Police of Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh), to The Hindu. Chaturvedi observed that the persistent commonality between all attacks remained that:

all cases were reported from lower-middle-class [and] jhuggi clusters with a very high population density […] took place within about half an hour of a power breakdown after nightfall […] and that] all cases were reported from residential areas [with] not a single incident in which a person travelling home alone on a road at night had been attacked. 138

From this Nigam concludes that settlements of the poor, largely labouring populations, living through prolonged spells of power cuts and darkness, sweating it out on the terraces that join together with those of other houses, was the theatre of its activities […] the very fact that the activities of this creature were limited to the lower and lower-middle-class neighbourhoods indicates its close link with a subaltern imagination and existence.139

Nigam’s chief argument is that civil society institutions reacted to the incident in the exact same terms of the rampant irrationality that seemed to have generated and fuelled it. Nigam also fixes three spatially mapped out terrains of disorder that can be distinguished from the various newspaper reports, interviews and editorials that he coalesces. The first of the three terrains is the civil society on the verge of disintegration under this deluge of ‘mass delusion.’ The second is the totality of state instruments, including the police, who prove to be inadequate in handling the situation to the extent of abetting it. This arises from a certain porosity that, Nigam argues, remains between this terrain of state institutions and the third terrain, which is the most dangerous of all. This third amorphous terrain is an order of community existence yet to be modernized into the norms of urban inhabitation and the cultures of rationality. The interventions called for on the part of the civil society to civilize the third terrain therefore, according to Nigam, are concomitant with the desire for claiming the urban as the space for the enlightened, rational, rights-bearing, agentic individuals who constitute the civil society in this discourse. A temporal rupture in the narrative of progress and modernization in this conceptual framework is thus mapped onto the desire for

138 Ibid. p.24
139 Ibid.
spatial segregation geared towards control and reform. The rogue niches need to be apprehended, tamed and assimilated before they can be granted right of access into the city. Nigam in his essay critiques the assumption of redundancy of this communitarian mode of life and shows the persistence of certain belief systems that are delegitimized in the rationalist discourses and in the overriding impulse for modernization. However a curious slippage happens in footnote no. 17, where Nigam says “it seems to me that these ‘pre-modern’ agrarian spaces, even when segregated, are marked by certain common rhythms and pace of life.”

A distinct temporal break is worked into the differentiated spatialities of urban Delhi even by Nigam’s own critique which seems to align itself with the position of the civil society. In this context, it might be especially productive here to look at the trajectory of the sightings of the monkeyman, where the first cases were reported from Uttar Pradesh bordering Delhi, from places like Ghaziabad, Dadri and Loni. In Delhi itself they were restricted to the southern parts of New Delhi, to habitations of industrial workers that can be presumed to have come into being at different stages of modernization itself.

For the film, the imperative to displace the occurrences into the heart of old Delhi is driven by this temporal break that Nigam also assumes in sustaining the category of something akin to the pre-modern. Of course it is also necessitated by the need to have an authentic, recognizable and expected picturesque skyline pinned by Delhi landmarks like the Jama Masjid, Red Fort, India Gate, etc. This second imperative to perform a recognizable Delhi derives from another source altogether that I will discuss a little later. For the moment to have an illustration of the process of production of an authentic spectacularization of Delhi, these production notes from the official website of Delhi 6 might be very relevant “[t]he terrace shots of Delhi 6 were shot on set in Jaipur but were given the feel of Delhi in post-production. Original backgrounds were replaced by images shot in Delhi. The key challenge in this shot was extending the generic terraces, building the geographic landmarks of the area like Jama Masjid, Golden Temple, Red Fort, with their respective geographical positions.”

140 Ibid. p.30
Mahal in Agra were also similarly CGI-ed onto the film with appropriate use of 3D light effects.

My argument here is therefore not about the monkeyman case itself i.e. neither about the film’s indexicality to real spaces nor the faithfulness to depicting by numbers what might have actually happened, but the manner in which it is narrated, apprehended, represented and explained—where the narrative impetus for intervention is created by the production of various rogue tendencies that build up towards the inevitability of a communal riot. The film traces the stages in the germination of this riot (and by extension perhaps any riot it would seem) in its rarefied petri dish: Delhi, Area Code 6, which is cinematically produced as a closed space resisting urbanization. Rather than the omnipresent and far more populous fringes perpetually threatening the gated precincts of the city of Delhi at large, Delhi 6 is an enclave awaiting assimilation into the heart of the country’s capital. The reversal of the equation of majority and minority is driven by the desire to have a space that can be controlled and assimilated. The film offers a resolution of the crisis and by the same token renders a particular set (and only that particular set) of urban spaces and modes of inhabitation meaningful in the process, of course with deeper implications as to for whom and for what purpose.

Roshan, the central protagonist of Delhi 6, is the bearer of the spactatorial gaze. The transformations in our perception of the mise-en-scene are motivated by and anchored in his point of view in ways which I will try to unpack in the following section. In this I differ from any possible reading of the film, which might claim that it is Roshan himself who is transformed and absorbed into the modes of existence of the enclave that is Delhi 6. An example of this reading is provided by this summary of the film below which narrates how:

Roshan eventually warms to the place and wholeheartedly embraces the sense of community in it [...] accompanies his grandmother to the Ramleelas, hangs out at Mamdu's sweet stall, plays with the children, and gradually becomes steeped in the culture [italics mine] of the place.142

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In my reading, Roshan makes sense of his surroundings, spaces and the *dramatis personae* inhabiting it, in the very terms that separate out this enclave as the third terrain in Nigam’s argument.

What we will see further through the film is an enactment of the process of assimilation indicated as the solution proposed by Roshan which hinges on the assumption (assumption here applicable both in the sense of taking possession of, and the faith in the possibility) of individual choice and agency.

As the above summary continues:

Roshan begins to understand the feuds and social issues in the community. Madangopal's sister Rama is unwed (at an age when spinsterhood is a significant social no-no) and Jaigopal's electrical business is going nowhere. The lecherous old local money lender Lala Bhairam is married to a young girl who, in turn, is having an affair with a young photo-studio hand Suresh. Suresh is a double timer who is also pursuing Madangopal's daughter Bittu. Roshan also crosses paths with the loutish inspector Ranvijay who blithely stretches his authorities to manhandle the locals, and becomes acquainted with the local assembly-woman who displays political power at every opportunity.  

It is precisely the incumbent pressures of this embeddedness that needs to be overcome in order that the residents can be assimilated.

The film itself opens in a chaotic succession of registers compressed into the opening sequence. The first, which we might only retroactively surmise as the monkeyman’s point of view, is a frenetically mobile camera that takes a top angle shot of a man urinating on a rooftop followed by voiceover that wonders ‘what if…none of this had come to pass’ on the soundtrack. The second is a *Ramleela*, being played out in silhouette on a red background as the symbolic battle between good and evil. There’s a brief prelude showing Roshan’s grandmother as she decides to breathe her last in the place where she belongs. Ground reality as it

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143 Ibid.
appears to Roshan is mediated through the third register, a news channel (IBN7, playing at the airport terminal in Delhi where Roshan disembarks with his grandmother) and seems absurd and surreal, as the newscaster waxes eloquent on the danger and the drama of the monkeyman sightings in Delhi urging for constant vigilance (with sound bites from witnesses describing the shining talons of the apparition). The film uses news telecasts as the other ironic leitmotif, the supposedly rational register that repeatedly fails to contain or explain the phenomenon (the real life culmination of which had been the Delhi Police producing a 200-page report debunking the entire ‘monkey business’ as a myth). In keeping with Nigam’s second terrain, television news dramatized to the extreme to the point of abetting anxieties as much as reporting them becomes complicit with the irrational. Both the transparency and potency of live television news are undermined on two counts. Anustup Basu in his reading of Apoorva Lakhiya’s 2003 film Mumbai Se Aya Mera Dost posits the “village [in that film…] not just [as] an ‘underdeveloped’ space, but [as] a pure sphere of noble natality untouched by a broader historical commerce of sight and sounds […] local in an absolute sense, in being the degree zero of the geo-televisual.”  

The inclusion of the televisual there “bring[s] about transformations in local habits, existential attitudes, and psychologies.[…] Couples in the village indulge in French kisses and strip teases on the sly and invent the ‘private’ as an epistemological space for nucleated desires.” Here, in contrast, global televisuality forms the secondary and peripheral accompaniment to transgressions already in place. In other words, in the former film the interrogation of the internal hierarchies of the enclosed space is initiated through, or mediated by, the geo-televisual. Here, transgressions keep getting cumulatively ascribed to the figure of the monkeyman, all of which Roshan will have to excise or subsume in the solution that he offers. For instance Suresh, the local photographer, is having an affair with moneylender Lala Bhairam’s very young wife. In a sequence where they are having sex in the afternoon, the television remote which gets in the way of their feet is constantly pressed such that the television switches to appropriate channels in accompaniment to their intercourse with ludic snippets of programmes

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144 Anustup Basu, Bollywood in the Age of New Media: The Geo-televisual Aesthetic, p. 126
145 Ibid.
on birds mating from Animal Planet, breathing techniques in yoga and finally to newsw of a rocket launching. However on the day that Lala Bhairam returns early to knock on the closed door of the bedroom, his wife claims that she had just been violated by the monkeyman. Bhairam rushes to the window to catch the miscreant but sees Roshan, who was just passing by, on the street below instead, thus arraigning him for the crime.

At a later point in the film, Baba Bandarmaar, a shaman who is clearly a charlatan, is brought in by the (Hindu) residents to grapple with the problem. Baba, testing the air, says he is able to access and converse with the souls of dead monkeys floating in the atmosphere just as only a TV antenna can capture images floating in space. This extraordinary metaphor also underscores the culpability of television as a vitiating medium as the residents by this time have been incorporated into news as participants in this permeate unrest as its objects and producers at the same time. The only space in the film which remains unaffected by the lane succumbing to riots is a place outside its periphery. ‘The Royal India Cyber Café: Billiard, Snooker and Pool Club’ owned by Ali Baig (an old friend of Roshan’s parents), where Roshan and Baig along with other frequenters, who are clearly more affluent, and by implication educated and therefore impervious to these anxieties compared to the local residents, watch the telecast with mounting concern. The notion of liveness, crucial to the production of the national symbolic especially in the age of informatics is itself thus hierarchized along its degrees of assimilation into the norm, such that Roshan’s cell phone camera and his laptop wired to the net, that appear elsewhere in the film, gain primacy over the contaminated circuits of news television.

*Delhi 6* uses the *Ramleela* performances as a reference framework to lend an extra rational iconicity to Roshan’s figure. Roshan’s arrival in Delhi coincides with *Dussehra* where his immediate surroundings have also been temporarily transformed into a riot of ‘religious’ pageants. The sequence of events in the narrative is punctuated by the performance of the *Ramleela* every evening on a stage erected by the local ‘Ramlila Committee’. The local MLA dressed in saffron uses the stage to ensure votes and sustained commitment from the populace for
her own party. The film plays with its constantly shifting affinities established between good and evil sides, between Hanuman and Ravan, with each appearance of the monkeyman (its connotations are fixed only at the very end of Delhi 6 as being the monkey inside everyone’s hearts which urges them on to feelings of “nafrat, lalach, khudgarzi” (hatred, avarice, selfishness) and is burned to ashes symbolically along with a straw effigy of Ravan. More interestingly, when Roshan’s grandmother makes him scrub himself with soil from the banks of the Ganges for having helped out with Jalebi the untouchable charwoman’s garbage cart, Roshan has to translate his interventions towards reform in terms of an episode from the Ramayana. Roshan explains to his grandmother and Gobar that even Lord Ram had accepted berries offered by an untouchable devotee Shabari even though she had touched and tasted each one to ensure that they were not sour. But the film also implicitly produces evidence that these categories that Roshan intercepts and intervenes into are more porous than he can surmise, as we learn from gossip exchanged between local kids that Jalebi, the untouchable charwoman, in spite of surface prohibitions to the contrary, has touched and initiated many a local adolescent into manhood.

The Ramleela remains one of the sources contributing to the constant accretion of meaning onto Roshan’s figure as an almost suprahuman assemblage of values and validations surpassing the figure of the ‘Kala Bandar’ (or black monkey) which in all this time is also being cannily deployed by the locals as a catch-all excuse for each and every aberration. Roshan is increasingly established in the film as the only one with unfettered access to all spaces, masjid and temple, public and domestic, poor and affluent, backward and progressive alike. And he soon masters this alien geography, leaping and bounding across lanes, terraces and climbing walls—to the extent that he is able to slip into a monkey suit and personify the monkeyman to detract the Hindu and Muslim sides gearing to attack each other by the end of the film. This last sequence is crosscut with the confrontation of Ram’s and Ravan’s armies on the Ramleela stage. The camera follows Roshan as frenetically as it had followed the point of view of the monkeyman earlier, and this time he is additionally validated by the accompaniment on the frame by a huddle of monkeys in the foreground. Roshan cumulatively embodies the
attributes of the gods, first Ram, and now Hanuman, the monkey god. The categories and sides come to roost.

Roshan on the soundtrack at the very beginning of the film says that his initiation to the city of Delhi was brought about by the ‘Kala Bandar’ (black monkey) and perhaps there was something ominous about it altogether. He travels into Delhi along with his grandmother in a red convertible driven by Ali Baig. On the way he rides past India Gate (accompanied by sarod on the soundtrack mixed to a beat) dozes off and wakes up nudged by a horse from a buggy in the middle of a deluge of local bodies and is bowled over by the mingled organicity of the space. The refrain on the sarod will return at the very end after Roshan, after being lynched and shot at, is miraculously brought back from certain death and is carried off in an ambulance which splutters and refuses to start till Roshan’s solution is acknowledged by all and established as a fait accompli beyond doubt. In the sequence at the beginning however the car rolls under the domes of a local masjid and is stopped by the local (Muslim) confectioner Mamdu intent on force-feeding jalebis to the entire ensemble. The lane, for all practical purposes, is divided and closed off from greater urban Delhi as we shall later see behind sets of heavy ornate gates which effectively reifies the space celebrating its uncontaminable otherness. The gate will become crucial only twice later in the film: the first time to enable Roshan’s passage into a dream space and the second time to separate the Hindu mohallah (or residences) from the Muslim one after the riots break out in the film driving a schism into the spaces that had seemed inseparable in this earlier moment in the film when the car bearing Roshan and his grandmother rolls into it for the first time. In this earlier segment, we see a group of qawals on the terrace of the masjid sing “Mora piya gar aya” (My lover has returned home) to their arrival. Roshan and his grandmother take their shoes off and enter the local temple overhung with clusters of brass bells while the song slowly fades out on the soundtrack underscoring the inalienable amalgam that the space forms across religious and communitarian divides. The songs in the film also function to attribute affective meanings to Roshan and produce spaces in the same move, validating his presence and assigning his role in each. Roshan does not gradually subscribe to the existing networks of enchantment, but rationalizes and neutralizes
them on the one hand while a different network of enchantment is slowly built up around him on the other.

It is possible to take note of the accumulation of the various differential spaces that Roshan runs into and tabulates on his cellphone while he jogs through its streets. With Roshan’s estranged eye as our alibi, the space of the city is reorganized in terms of a way of viewing India with uncanny affinities, for instance, with the *Incredible India* initiative for the promotion of tourism.

In the panel discussion ‘Incredible India @60’ held in New York on 26th September 2007 about the building of ‘Brand India’ for the Incredible India campaign, the onus of the success of this campaign was laid repeatedly on producing a model branding campaign as a template that could be utilized by each of the 27 states for designing their own sub-brand campaigns. The emphasis was on communication and the importance of meeting expectations (for instance, meeting the overwhelming demand for yoga). The corollaries to its success were the development of infrastructure and “greater attention to civic governance” to amend the India that John Kenneth Galbraith had described in the 1960s as “the world’s only functioning anarchy.” The crux of the transformation in outlook, as explained by Vir Sanghvi, can predictably be located in the time following the 1991 liberalization—“it was a time when we finally began to see the world in real time. We finally felt part of the world, we felt connected [...] it was hugely important for the Indian middle class. We felt, finally, like citizens of the world.”

This anchoring in the present as read by Sanghvi is located in the youth demographic who “don’t even remember what India was like before economic liberalization […] and they] have been very important in changing the way middle-class India behaves.” The functionality and fascination of this look however derives from the immediate palpability of these experiences which is simultaneously a forgetting of the historic specificities, or in other words, the fact

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147 Ibid. p. 237
148 Ibid. p. 238
149 Ibid. p. 247
that the experiences desired and accumulated might belong to quite contradictory frameworks.

It is also precisely this flattening of time and space that makes Roshan’s dream sequence possible in Delhi 6: in the dream the camera constantly pans, circles, and swish pans to produce an unbroken space where discrete elements from Roshan’s inventory are strung together. Roshan wakes up on the terrace to find the Statue of Liberty ensconced snugly within the Delhi skyline. He walks out of the ornate gates enclosing the lane into a New York main street where Bittu stands dressed in white, Gobar offers them his plate of offerings from the temple. Mamdu fries jalebis by the side of the street. Colourfully embellished rickshaws swarm past them. Roshan jogs behind an array of sweetmeats laid out in the foreground, but is held immobile in screen centre even as he does so, as people from the lane filter past him; he is undoubtedly the stationary centre of this universe. A group of passers-by stops to take pictures as women from the neighbourhood gather to pray in front of a sacred cow and are joined by a flock of nuns and a rabbi. NY cabs, rickshaws and a horse mounted policeman move down the street guided by a Delhi traffic constable. Bittu and Roshan standing in front of the tree from the temple back home watch Hanuman in full god-poster regalia fly across the New York skyline before landing on a chariot festooned with garlands carrying Ram and Laxman from the Ramleela. Shiva and Parvati on one side and Ravan on the other with the abducted Sita at their feet sit in a tableau behind Roshan when the camera swishes back from the chariot to find him. A carnivalesque parade descends on the street alongside Ali Baig’s convertible with Roshan’s parents in the back seat of the car. The sky turns a dusky pink as Bittu sets Masakali the pigeon on flight and Roshan finds himself piloting a red Spitfire aeroplane. He waves at the kids from Delhi on the ground and flies his plane to the Empire State Building on the top of which he finds Bittu in the arms of the monkeyman. She takes his mask off and Roshan, from the plane, is bewildered to see the face that is revealed underneath, his own.

Roshan’s dream subsuming time and space in the preferred frame is the explicit agenda of the film. But to achieve it, the cinematic construction of his figure
accrues its meaning from other ‘othered’ circuits of meaning production altogether. It is not the map that Roshan carries with him but the efficacy of his presence as an excuse for the spectator to mobilize a palimpsest of sights, sounds and tastes from the trajectories of these short-circuiting shifting maps that congeal smoothly for Roshan and the constant accretion of meanings within the film that become so deeply implicated in each other that it becomes near impossible to extricate categories, strains and tendencies and our own investments in each from the entanglements. The binaries constantly produced in the film thus become structurally necessary for Roshan’s intervention as much as their sustenance was necessary in the analysis of the actual monkeyman case in Aditya Nigam’s article.

Let us now focus for a moment on the accretion of affect onto Roshan through the songs in Delhi 6. I read the song and dance sequences (that produce the specificity of the Indian popular film) in Delhi 6 not so much in their presence as spectacular interruptions stalling the flow of the narrative but as anticipating larger narrative movements, nudging the narrative forward by articulating what is left unsaid and by thus configuring Roshan’s place in various registers of affect, by investing his figure with meanings and desires. The songs also serve to sanctify and authenticate the existing status quo in their delineation of spaces as gendered or communal (in the religious sense of the term) by mobilizing and mapping older cartographies of affect onto them.

One of the first songs that introduces us to the spaces mediated through Roshan’s encounters is ‘Delhi 6 (Yeh Dilli Hai Mere Yaar)’ where Roshan starts out on a jog on his first morning there from the temple where he rings a cluster of bells. The local simpleton Gobar (his name literally meaning cowdung) hands him some prasad from a plate of offerings and moves on to Bittu—Roshan’s yet to be developed love interest—appearing in the background; she has her head demurely covered in a dupatta supplementing her traditional ethnic salwar kameez. A montage of shots follow placing the characters in their respective habitual everyday spaces. The elderly Muslim patriarch Haji Suleiman bends forward in morning prayers with the masjid looming over him in the background. Roshan runs through the cramped lanes into a wrestler’s akhra (den) presided over by a
garlanded idol of the monkey god Hanuman where Mamdu the local confectioner, inspite of being a Muslim, is working out in his loincloth and poses happily for Roshan’s cellphone camera in front of the idol. From here on the visuals break into a series of picturesque stills of Delhi as mediated and documented systematically by Roshan’s camera as he inventories elements that would be incongruously but touchingly recontextualized in a wholly different cosmogony in the dream sequence. Of course the reinsertion of these elements into Roshan’s dream space is enabled by this primary move where his snapshots—freeze frames in the film as well—fragment the city space into discrete and unconnected elements. The spliced up city space captured in frozen cameos include a close up of god posters in a streetside stall, schoolgirls in tartan skirts hitching a ride on the foot-rest at the back of a rickshaw, hand-painted advertisements on a wall from which bright blue paint in peeling off in patches, pigeons in flight over a gothic iron fence, a monkey clambering up a cluster of electric cables in a main street, a makeshift shrine in the middle of a marketplace with an idol of the goddess Durga astride a lion slaying the buffalo demon Mahishasura, a cycle rickshaw driver sprawled out on the seat of his vehicle reading a newspaper. Bittu is shown interspersed with the stills going into the Delhi underground train station and then, more intriguingly, inside a public toilet where she takes off her traditional garb to reveal a halter neck backless top that she’s wearing underneath. She puts on chunky bangles on her wrist, ties a bandana round her head and the camera holds still for a moment in close-up on her pierced navel. Bittu is the only person other than Roshan (and Ali Baig of course) who is shown in the city ‘outside’, mostly commuting on the train or at the station. She can switch between modes straddling both time (backward/progressive) and space (inside/outside) and will not require the necessary transformation into ideal citizenhood. The only imperative is for her to recognize Roshan as her most suitable partner.

‘Sasural Genda Phool’ based on a traditional folksong from Chhattisgarh is sung by the women (Roshan’s grandmother, and her neighbours, the complacent wives of the conflicted brothers Madan Gopal and Jaigopal Sharma, and Madan Gopal’s quiet spinster sister) while they are pickling fat red chillies on the terrace on top of Roshan’s father’s house. The camera pans in close-up over the various spices and
condiments, the old fashioned pickling jars, and the streams of golden oil pouring into them. The women’s collective domestic workspace is however circumscribed by their husbands on adjacent terraces, Madan Gopal letting out his homing pigeons for a flight on one terrace and Jai Gopal flying kites with the neighbourhood kids on another. The song laments the travails of a young bride at her in-laws: the harsh words of her mother-in-law, her husband’s brother who placates his mother on her behalf and the husband, resplendent in his ‘bush-shirt’ away at work. The sense of nostalgic plenitudinal domestic bliss that is constructed with the sensual images of the array of pickles, and the women, who break into an impromptu dance around Roshan, places him in the place of the absent husband.

Another episode of collective singing happens at the Jagaran or wake offering prayers for the Goddess Durga hosted by Roshan’s grandmother at her house. The series of devotional songs sung in succession also function to segregate the gendered spaces as the men sing first, the two brothers aggressively trying to out-sing each other while the women work in the background putting together items required in the rituals or sit on the fringes clapping in rhythm to the men singing. There is a power-cut interrupting the vocal duel and the women’s songs follow later in the night, in the softer light of votive candles, more melodious and plaintive. The wives of the two brothers are silent witnesses to their husbands’ fights even in the rest of the film, exchanging news, gossip and snacks through a hole (which is kept sealed by a loose brick) in the wall separating their houses when their husbands are not around.

The manner in which Delhi 6, conceptualizes, real-izes (in the sense of making real), accesses and finally, orders space is isomorphic with certain other projects of producing an authentic and ideal Indian space: first from a vantage point located outside its geographical territory (the India expected by tourists) and second from the inside, privileging the ideal citizen. It demythifies the sacral whereby mythic notions of good and evil good are invoked only to be subjected to being matters of individual choice exercised by the contemporary subject (albeit a
position that is hard earned) and yet subsumes and mobilizes sacral affects to reinforce Roshan.