Chapter 3: Violent Juxtapositions

In the previous chapter I looked at attempts from within the film industry to create a cinema for the affluent middle classes. The notion of a mass cinema that appeared in the discourse of film criticism or academic discourse of an earlier era had begun to shed its celebratory aura not only in terms of its widely derided aesthetics but also in terms of the commercial imperative within the industry to recover money. The quest pertinent to the times was to establish a cinema fit for its new audience, a cinema sophisticated in form and sanitized in content that could offer its intended audience—affluent, educated, and urban—room for identification. The presence of the city (of Mumbai or Bombay specifically, and often just the city as an abstract placeholder in the films taken up for analysis, however, go on to show that the status of the city, even when central, was far from given. It was neither homogenous nor consensual across the board. Rather, the city tended to appear as a site fraught with a host of different claims and contestations and got caught up in different, often overlapping networks of meaning in each strain. The question of the identity of the middle class and the opportunities available to it for intervention into the sphere of the social and political life of the country was also crucial for each of these trajectories. The notion of realism itself was premised upon how the city was made to divulge its complexities on screen. The credentials of Madhur Bhandarkar’s films as ‘realistic,’ for example, was premised upon showing things as they really are, with an emphasis on character plausibility and a carefully wrought agenda to engage with contemporary social, and somewhat tangentially,

150 Ashish Nandy or Chidananda Dasgupta’s views that respectively applaud and deride the mass base and plebeian aesthetics of Bombay cinema represent two poles of this tendency.
151 Madhava Prasad in ‘Realism and Fantasy in Representations of Metropolitan Life in Indian Cinema’ (in City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience, ed. Preben Kaarsholm, 2004) talks of the appearance of Bombay as the ‘default metropolis: “the term ‘Bambai’ serves to signify the generic metropolitan other, rather than the specific entity that the city of Mumbai is.”(p. 87)
While this description refers chiefly to the city as one of the terms of the binary in the country city opposition, it can be extended to read the abstract status of the specific city of Mumbai or Delhi in Page 3 (2005, Madhur Bhandarkar), Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year (2009, Shimit Amin), Wake Up Sid (2009, Ayan Mukerji) or Band Baaja Baraat (2010, Maneesh Sharma). The city that appears in each of these films is a dense metropolitan space that has to be negotiated and claimed by its protagonists in the course of their coming of age narratives.
political issues. The impetus to create awareness, if not to initiate change, was crucial to the organizing logic of the everyday mundane interactions that Bhandarkar’s oeuvre captured in the city. The significance of these films thus lies in the implicit ethical/moral responsibility accorded to the middle class protagonists at the centre of the narrative. At the same time the city also became the site in which the claims and anxieties of the middle class in the larger framework or context of the nation(al) was being established. In Madhur Bhandarkar’s films these anxieties were aligned with the desire to establish a putative hegemony for the middle class (and in so doing Bhandarkar somewhat anachronistically resuscitates the concerns of the middle class cinema of the ’70s.) But at the same time these were anxieties generated precisely by the impossibility of that desire, though ad hoc resolutions were usually incorporated to bring about a narrative closure in at least two of the films cited (Page 3 and Fashion.) In cinematic terms, the sense of unease, apprehension and anxiety that haunt Bhandarkar’s characters were premised on the conceptualization of the city space in terms of certain entitlements, disenfranchisements and modes of becoming that it could present to a subject who can qualify as being middle class in education and economic power (or more precisely its lack). It was a subject imbued with a sense of morality, and a set of progressive, developmentalist values (for instance, in the emphatic didactic charge in Bhandarkar’s interpretations of reality, or in Delhi 6 by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra which makes space for possible interventions towards social reform.) The mapping of space was in terms of confrontations between contrary principles: older or newer values, or simply values and their sheer absence. The films discussed in this chapter are products of the same socio-economic scenario that provides the backdrop for the cinema of anxiety in the preceding chapter (for example, Ram Gopal Varma as a director and producer provides one of the common threads to a particular set of films in either chapter) and yet show markedly different ways of making sense of the ‘real’, as it were, in their representations of the same spaces. The violent vista of the city here offers up more than a merely obvious, literal counterfoil to the ordered, productive city aspired to, if not attained, in the films discussed in the previous chapter. This city of violence then, conjures up another notion or register of violence altogether: not
in the resistance that it constantly presents to the individual inhabiting it, nor merely in thwarting the mobility or aspirations of the protagonists or the collective posited, but also as an irrepressible contradiction and perpetual confrontation between positions from which the city can be made sense of. Positions that cannot be reduced to sociological categories or narrative types (the upper and lower classes, or the police and the mafia respectively) but which signify in effect an agonistic tussle between opposed frameworks—of apprehension, understanding and possibilities of intervention into, or of modes of belonging in the city.

It is important to note that over and above the individual generic imperatives of the films in question the city space in all its ambiguities is configured and characterized under a very different logic in each set. In the former set they present a spatial metonym (in terms of the nation) for a class claiming a precarious hegemony or marking out the challenges against its possibility. The latter set of films problematizes the picture by the insistent presence of a different, contradicting past. However, as the generic accruals will demonstrate, this latter set in the same move challenges the boundaries of the metonymic city space as the microcosm of the nation culled out in the former trajectory, and inscribes it with the signs of a very different path to the present moment, and by the same token produces a fundamentally different portent for its future. The films in this chapter are thus vital to the central argument of my thesis in marking out the boundaries or limits of one framework by excavating and laying out the implications of the other.

The city of ruins and violence that forms the inalienable backdrop to the films of the underworld, gang wars and police encounters has been unpacked and analysed by film academics in the last decade from several perspectives, all of which focus in varying degrees on its radical difference from earlier representations of the city in Bombay cinema. Ranjani Mazumdar’s analysis, as the most extensive study of the phenomena, locates the city as generated from an excess of banality, a bursting at the seams as it were, of the urban experience. The city in these readings also becomes a likely site for the coming together of certain forms of hypermasculinity, be it in the suave patois of the tapori or in the morphologies of violence that Ravi Vasudevan locates in the community formations of the city.
often imbued with a melodramatic yearning for a uterine order opposed to the law of the father.

This chapter identifies, historicizes and contextualizes the differential claims on the common space of the city posed by these different ways of configuring the city. In keeping with the thematic genealogies that I construct elsewhere in this thesis, this also is a retrospective journey to identify and isolate earlier constellations that came into being under specific socio-economic conditions of possibility. But in contrast to the previous chapter which looks at a cross section of the popular film industry at a particular moment in time, this is going to be the only chapter in my dissertation that undertakes a chronological account of sorts towards an increasing refinement, a crystallization of possible ways of representation of the city as a site of violence, and the praxis of a different order of politics—but rather than make sea claims about the nature and complexities of democratic politics in India I would urge you to note that I limit this exercise only to the extent that this praxis is captured in the film texts that I look at. Let us also concede that no framework is pure. It is merely as a conglomeration of elements and effects, always and already miscegenated in cinematic terms that become tendentially closer to one or the other of the frameworks considered as broader analytical categories that I read my film texts.

II Laterality: Incursions of the Real

The city of ruins and violence constitutes the telos, in a manner of speaking, of the second movement that I delineate above. The ‘gangland Bombay’ films, as the most readily identifiable manifestation of the city as the site of relentless violence, at one level gathered momentum by drawing their representational conventions from the genre of urban action films that congealed in the ’80s (films like Gardish, 1993, Priyadarshan; Parinda, 1989, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, etc.). This was the decade in which, with the increased ghettoization of the lower and lower middle classes, certain traits began to evolve in popular Bombay cinema over and above the subjects of class resistance and disaffection with social institutions that had marked a prominent cross section of the films of the previous era. The socio-economic transformations of specific significance to the Bombay
represented in these films had as their background, and often as narratively integrated points of reference, several major upheavals through the decade. Among events of particular valence to and impact on the very texture of urban life in Bombay were the textile strikes of 1982 and ’83 which had led to the subsequent closure of mills and pervasive unemployment in the labour sector coupled with the disempowerment of labour unions. The rise of the Shiv Sena at this political juncture was premised on this sense of disenfranchisement and economic insecurity as it mobilized the populace through a culture of “plebeian insubordination,” spectacularized violence, community solidarity and acts of othering segments of Bombay’s migrant population (Tamils in the initial stages of mobilization, for instance) in its specific mode of local identity politics. It was perhaps inevitable that in 1995 it would establish its alliances with the Bharatiya Janata Party’s chauvinistic Hindutva drive. In the interim period, Bombay was pulverized by successive riots in the period between December 1992 and January 1993 in the backlash following the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. Attacks on Muslims were justified as retaliations against the first phase of the riot allegedly initiated by Muslims. But the pervasive administrative neglect of incidences of systematic violence directed against the Muslim community led the Congress led Maharashtra government into appointing the Srikrishna Commission to enquire into both the riots and the subsequent bomb blasts of 1993 in an attempt to salvage the reputation of its state machinery. The cycle of violence continued with the bomb blasts in March 1993 which occurred in thirteen different locations dispersed across Bombay, and were reportedly orchestrated by Dawood Ibrahim acting in response to the enormous communal carnage and damage to Muslim-owned businesses and property in the communal riots of 1992–93. Gyan Prakash describes the times as one of a “crisis of the liberal order.”

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152 Ironically it was the Shiv Sena that had been the instigators of violence against the trade unions in the 1960s when the Bharatiya Kamgar Sena, Shiv Sena’s militant wing, infiltrated the labour force of factories to ‘protect’ the workers from labour unionism driven by the logic that strikes organized by unions curtailed production, thus keeping the workers in perpetual poverty. See Hansen, Violence in Urban India: Identity Politics, ‘Mumbai’, and the Postcolonial City, 2005, p.63
153 Hansen, Violence in Urban India, p.9
154 The Shiv Sena’s official excuse for the instigation of violence had been the death of members of the Bharatiya Kamgar Sena in southern Bombay.
underworld to act on behalf of the Muslim community was a telling commentary on the state of the rule of law.\textsuperscript{156} disintegrating under “[t]he combination of the Shiv Sena’s populism, the Congress’ resort to political expediency, the collapse of the mills, and the rise of the underworld and Hindu nationalism.” \textsuperscript{157}

The process of segregation of the city by the state on the other hand was carried out in a series of drives for urban reorganization which entailed “the removal of vendors, hawkers, small workshops and artisanal units” \textsuperscript{158} to make the city amenable for large scale foreign investment that followed the real estate boom of the 1990s.

The imprint of these transformations in the social, political and economic sphere translated into the medium of Bombay cinema of this period in formal and narrative inflections that reframed the older scenario, as Ravi Vasudevan observes, by “narrativizing new visions of social subjectivity and urban being, and offering a variety of political trajectories.”\textsuperscript{159} Vasudevan in his essay that analyses the morphologies of violent bodies (bodies perpetrating, and subject to, violence) in popular cinema argues that this gave rise to a “generative grammar of urban criminality that can speak about a range of experiences, from twisted forms of subalternity and new locales for urban meaning in the neighbourhood, down to cinema as a mode of urban experience.”\textsuperscript{160} In the gangland films, where all these tendencies came to roost, the city emerged as a site of corporeal violence, which infiltrated the body of the films in the form of what Vasudevan calls “mise en scenes of urban terror.”\textsuperscript{161} The text itself began to bear signs of the experiential violence of navigating and apprehending the city in the formal elements of editing or camera movement which were simultaneously informed by what Vasudevan calls a “world cinema parallax” that borrowed elements from the available history

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid. p 301
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid. p. 302
\textsuperscript{159} Ravi Vasudevan, ‘Selves Made Strange: Violent and Performative Bodies in the Cities of Indian Cinema’. in body.city: citing contemporary culture in India, eds. Indira Chandrasekhar and Peter C. Seel, 2003, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{160} Vasudevan ‘Selves Made Strange’ p. 100.
\textsuperscript{161} Vasudevan, ‘The Exhilaration of Dread’ p.226. —I have looked at some of the manifestations of this unnameable unmoored sense of dread in the previous chapter in the context of the horror films by Ram Gopal Varma.
of generic conventions of urban *noir* generated elsewhere and mapped them onto the city at hand.

While on the one hand this urban sensorium saturated with signs of violent upheaval was reproduced and enhanced in the perceptual regime of the urban action film genre incipient to this period, the gradual crystallization of its repertoire also provided a lens of dystopia and ruin through which one could make sense of the heterogeneous spaces of the city. The incurrence of the Bombay (and later Dubai) underworld on the film industry\textsuperscript{162} was also an important influence on the cinema of this period that attests to a fascination with it in tandem with a sense of lawlessness that motivated several films of vigilantism, personal vengeance and violent retribution (most marked in the Sunny Deol or Sunil Shetty starring films of this period that usually follow the defection of the hero from his circumscribed position in the service of law and order and choosing to return criminal violence in its own currency.) Bombay cinema’s ambiguous fascination with the underworld of course has a much older precedence. The question thus is not why the gangland film as an *already existing* genre repeatedly finds itself confined to or associated with the city of Bombay. Rather, it is the very proximity of a real life gangland Bombay constantly produced and referred to in networks of information (news, gossip, fiction, reportage, investigative reconstructions of events on television and in print) as well as the spectre of the underworld’s control over finance and other aspects of the film industry that Bombay cinema is grappling to represent at this juncture in the ’80s. Thus the question as such is under what terms and conditions (generic and socio-economic-political) do they become permissible narratives.

At one level thus, cinema provided the necessary cognitive framework for the apprehension of the real city in the manner argued by J. Dudley Andrew: “films go far beyond the subjects they treat. Indeed cinema more than reflecting the thinking of an era, makes possible such thinking. It provides the means of representing the conditions of life. It confirms or alters our ways of seeing. This marks a constitutive, not a reflective relation.”\textsuperscript{163} In conjunction with and

\textsuperscript{162} Extensive evidence of this sense of siege can be found in film magazines of the period.

supplementing Vasudevan’s claim I’d like to propose that the films of violence began to posit an optic for apprehending the everyday lived city with undeniable currencies with the political and economic reorganizations and formations that took place in contemporary Bombay which cannot be reduced to any kind of unilateral or unidirectional sequence of cause and effect prioritizing either the representative field or ‘real life’ so to say. While on the one hand there were visible indications of the ‘saffronization’ of the city, such as in Farhan Akhtar’s remake of Don (2006, original by Chandra Barot, 1978), where the Bombay underclass congregates at the public festivities around the Ganapathy festival, there was also the trace of the influence of the gangland films in the way members of the underworld were self-fashioning their identities as documented in Suketu Mehta’s Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found (2004) and elsewhere. The compulsion to understand the real as refracted through Bombay cinema is put most succinctly by Gyan Prakash talking about his book Mumbai Fables:

Hindi films enter your sensibility. At least, they have entered mine. Cinematic imagination influences your writing. For example, when I was writing the chapter on Krishna Desai’s murder and the rise of Shiv Sena, I couldn't help but view it also as a cinematic narrative, one that moved through powerful visual images. […] In general, I found the directness and economy of cinematic representations very useful in disciplining my writing, in sticking to the essential and the most important.

The traffic between films and other media, such as news telecast, also becomes relevant in this reading as conversely new filmic conventions emerged, which owe their origins to other modes of dissemination which would lend their own representational idioms to cinema at this juncture. Black Friday (2004, Anurag Kashyap) a film based on S. Hussain Zaidi’s book Black Friday—The True Story of the Bombay Blasts (itself a narrativized reportage of the events leading up to the 1993 bomb explosions) approximates a documentary mode, but fleshes out its editing, mobile camera, and mise-en-scene confined to the back alleys, police

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166 Amitava Kumar reviewing Gyan Prakash’s Mumbai Fables quotes his interview with the author in ‘How to write like a Historian’ in Booksload, February 2011.
holdups and torture chambers, railway tracks and lower class residential spaces through a representational repertoire crystallized specifically in the gangland films of dread, persecution and violence in the city. Sanjay Gupta’s Zinda (2006), on the other hand, an unapologetic remake of a South Korean film, Oldboy (2003, Park Chan-wook), relies on this framework of intelligibility posited by the gangland genre, though the city depicted is Bangkok rather than Bombay and the film incorporates exact replications of several sequences from the original film.

Satya (Ramgopal Varma, 1998), without doubt the film that established the idiom for the gangland film, was said to have been conceived as an inventory of various characters that director Ram Gopal Varma had encountered in the city. Varma’s documentary impetus comes out in his credo that “The point is that a filmmaker is like a journalist in projecting reality in the true sense of the word.” Varma’s cartography of the city of Bombay in Satya, executed with the help of Gerard Hooper, whose background was in documentary film-making in the United States, was radical in its use of location shots, which at the time was unprecedented in the industry. With extensive low light shooting, the use of a mobile hand held camera in cramped spaces, characterological innovations and deliberate de-glamorisation of existing stars like Urmila Matondkar, it inaugurated a particular mode of film-making that persisted in subsequent productions by Varma and his production house as well as a host of other filmmakers. Moinak Biswas, in providing a “chronicle background” to Maqbool (an adaptation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth made by Vishal Bhardwaj in 2004), describes a fascination of the Bombay underworld [in] its approximation of reality, the startling proximity that it has to our wakeful reality of the day. The speech, the visage, the humour, habitat, inter-personal connections—in short a whole cinematic body [...] created for implantation on a range of texts. The semiotic accumulation that supports such density of accumulation has come from an activity wider than cinema, from a visual culture in which cinema found itself embedded in the nineties. The new visual and sound forms have developed across cinematic genres, but it is the urban crime

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film where objects and surfaces have been processed into a fascinating tactility.\(^{168}\)

Capturing the stuff and substance of the real translated into a visual idiom that was viscerally proximate with the experiential density of the uncertainty and violence of life in the city was thus the most readily recognizable characteristic of the gangland Bombay films. The seduction of the spectacle and the modes of life of the underworld, the thrill of violence, of men and guns, of an essentially male camaraderie between brothers in crime, the headiness of the patois, the sharp gritty visual style capable of viscerally manipulating the audience, the meanderings through the underbelly of the city of Bombay have all without doubt held Bombay cinema sufficiently enthralled to lead to the preponderance of the gangland films and its proliferation in various guises.

But the palpability of the visual experience, the hyper tactility of movements and surfaces, and the giddy speed of action in the city streets has also been capitalized upon by heist films like *Race* (2008, Abbas-Mustan), *Cash* (2007, Anubhav Sinha), *Dhoom* and *Dhoom2: Back in Action* (Sanjay Gadhvi, 2004 and 2006 respectively), and their difference from the gangland films is perhaps not entirely explained by the latter’s cast of characters, and the sense of claustrophobia, drudgery and dread permeating the mise-en-scene which mediated the experience of life in Bombay at street level alone.

So was there anything in excess to the visual idiom approximating the uncertainty and violence of life in the city that was germinal to the way the gangland Bombay films made meaning of the city?

In response to Anurag Kashyap’s retrospective account of the experience of scriptwriting *Satya* on his blog, a disgruntled commentator asks “Dont you feel sad Anurag that Mr Varma has made Satya so many times now? Company, Sarkar… he calls them trilogy but it’s that same brooding feel, same ominous music, same low cam angles… it’s like deja vu really… godfather or apu trilogy each film stands on its own and is completely original… three films cant form a

trilogy just stylistically... can it? [sic]”  It is indeed the perceived autonomy and fixity of stylistic elements, which the post concisely identifies, that are of significance. But it seems pertinent to argue that the traffic of stylistic elements across the films might have owed their possibility to something other than a heuristic refining or reiteration of generic concerns alone. What we can effectively extrapolate from the post above, and forward for our argument in the following section, is a lament for the passing of a moment in potentia. A moment made possible by Satya and its immediate successors in the ways in which they radically reconfigured the cinematic experience of the city, while at the same time putatively reinterpreting an earlier aesthetic of discontent adapted to the contemporary moment of the late ’90s.

Satya thus seems both a culmination and a new point of origin—both are eminently defensible readings—but it is precisely to unpack the nature of politics in the field of representation (in Bombay cinema of this period) that it is necessary to posit Satya as our provisional telos for the time being. Why is it at all necessary to think of it in terms of a telos requiring its own genealogy? And where do we place a point of origin for this putative genre?

III Prehistory: Origin Myths and Deewar

For this it is necessary to trace the origins of a disruptive and disturbing cityscape, yet further back to the ’70s. The city (again of Bombay) which was simultaneously the backdrop and the raison d’être of the soon to become iconic production of the angry young man persona of Amitabh Bachchan has been unpacked and analysed by film academics in the last two decades from several perspectives. I will take my cue from some of them to identify the terms on which certain differential claims can be made on the same space of the city.

The changing face of the metropolis of Bombay had already begun to impinge on the representational economy of Bombay cinema in the ’70s, Ravi Vasudevan argues, in its “realist description of the spaces of dockyards, warehouses, railway platforms, mines, construction sites.” But unlike the euphoric reformist

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170 Ravi Vasudevan ‘Selves made Strange’ p. 89
impulse of the ’50s characterised by the depiction of dams, factories and railways, the interpretive work undertaken by the films of the ’70s mobilized and critiqued a set of iconographies representing the bulwark of the Nehruvian nation symbolically manifest in its dams, railways, factories, dockyards and construction sites which accrue a radically different charge in this period as the dystopic space of urban disaggregation, disillusionment and dread.

While Vasudevan’s argument stresses the increasing alienation of the city in the experience of the lower classes as it was represented in cinema, in a slightly different account Ashish Rajadhyaksha claims that the liminal spaces in the popular cinema of the ’70s were in fact the cinematic real-ization (in the sense of making real) of Article 15 of the Indian Constitution which assures access to all citizens irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth to not only public spaces but to shops, hotels and other places of public entertainment. While Vasudevan’s argument indicates a regime of prohibitions inherent in the very architecture of the city, Rajadhyaksha’s empowers Bombay cinema of the ’70s with the capacity to overcome the same—both however converge in the perception of an increasingly palpable sense of territorialities that had its roots in the perceived delegitimization of the state in its failure to deliver guarantees it had originally promised equally and unequivocally to every citizen.

The two extremely crucial observations made by Madhava Prasad in this context are: one, that the ’70s as a threshold brought forth “a formal shift […] premised on the centrality of a subaltern perspective, which necessarily includes a strong sense of community solidarity” “seen through the eyes of the underclass: beggars,

171 Article 15 of the Indian constitution states that:

Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth

1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them
2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and palaces of public entertainment; or (b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public
3) Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children
4) Nothing in this article or in clause (2) of Article 29 shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

vagrants, thieves, alcoholics.”

And two, as its corollary, that this shift accorded an autonomy to the city space in excess to the country-city divide, which had earlier to a large extent subordinated possible explorations of the specificities of a metropolitan existence to the imperatives of a “symbolic representation of opposed values.”

Prasad, while attributing the shift in the specificity of the city to factors as diverse as technological innovations to changing aesthetics in latter decades, nonetheless argues that “the narratives of these films continued to be overdetermined by the theme of epic confrontation between the community and the law.”

In anchoring its point of view in the underclass, especially in a context of deep disillusionment with the reformist possibilities of the earlier era, these films, Prasad reiterates, emphatically foregrounded “a strong sense of community solidarity.”

Here I’d like to isolate for the moment one of the terms that will be central for my argument in this chapter, the autonomy of the city, to concentrate on this community-state dichotomy that was nonetheless mediated through the city. I would argue that the city that appeared in these films was yet to achieve autonomy from this division between the city and its outside as long as it was seen as internally split on the same terms of differentiation. For the purpose of identifying the opposed elements in this divide, let me point out that the split was not merely between contesting classes, communities, religious groups, or territorialities represented by criminals or warlords, or state institutions, rather it was concretized by neatly classifying these multiple contenders under one or the other arm in a larger dichotomy between ‘community’ and ‘state’. The erstwhile split between the city and the country was now internalized within the very space of the city even as it was gaining critical mass in terms of the range of experiences it had potentially begun to contain.

What was also inherent in this split was a temporal scheme that relegated one arm of the divide-between-spaces to its anchoring in the past: the urban communities

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172 Prasad, ‘Realism and Fantasy in Representations of Metropolitan life in Indian Cinema,’ p. 93.  
173 Ibid. p. 89. More expansively put on p. 97: “in these instances of representation of the underside of metropolitan life in contemporary India, we see, over time, the slow birth of the city as the unsymbolizable remainder from the womb of the symbolic geography, in which the encounter between city and country is the fulcrum of representation.”  
174 Ibid. p. 92  
175 Ibid. p. 93
were in fact poor compensations for the rural pasts that the majority of the migrant workers had been forced to leave behind. Paradoxically, the communities were qualified and animated by this memory of the past which was on the one hand the protective mechanism of its members in the face of the failed guarantees of the state to accord equal rights to all its citizens irrespective of class or social position. On the other hand, as in the case of the proletariat hero, it was the communitarian backward glance (not yet transposed or re-convened within the actual space of the urban) that was also often the reason behind the trauma that had interrupted a smooth transition from the past to the present (and purportedly the future) under the aegis of what could have been a benevolently democratic state supervision. In other words, the implementation of guarantees may have been indeed the promise that the state had retracted upon, but paradoxically, the resistant structure of the older community networks was what the state had confronted and desisted to as the reason behind its inability to deliver. These two conceptions of community, temporal and spatial, differ in their political implications and imperatives. In the first instance i.e. the failure on the part of the state to deliver corresponds with an understanding aligned with a nascent formation of something akin to a ‘political society’ in that it allows for the ascription of a political consciousness and agency to the disenfranchised masses who would invest their discontent in the proletariat hero of the ’70s. The relevance of the spatio-temporal schema in this understanding is in its suspension of the teleological drive towards the formation of the normative citizen as the ideal recipient of the guarantees of the state, and its substitution with a spatial demand for disbursing rights to the sections of the populace overlooked by the state. In the second instance i.e. the resistance posed by the purportedly feudal enclaves, it is the imperative for temporalization which posits the completion of the move towards the ideal citizen as a prerequisite for the extension of any guarantees. The former rationale made it imperative for the underclass to identify a certain sense of entitlement and articulate it through the hero, who would redress the balance if only by extra legal means. The legitimacy

176 The notion of ‘political society’ is used by Partha Chatterjee (‘Beyond the Nation or within?’ in Economic and Political Weekly, 1997), as a collective specific to the nature of our contemporary Indian democracy. It has been expanded and elaborated further in his subsequent writings, most notably in Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011.
of the hero himself derived from his own personal past trauma, metaphorically crystallizing the collective condition of marginality of the underclass. In *Deewar* (1975, Yash Chopra), for example, the retreat of the union leader father leaves an indelible mark of shame and pain on the arm of the child Vijay, which resurfaces on screen precisely at the moment when Vijay decides to confront the mafia extortionists at the dockyard where he works as a porter. There the past compressed almost metonymically in the form of the tattoo on Vijay’s arm thus incites and instigates action towards any possible resolution. Memory could very well have functioned to qualify the spatial segregation of the space of the community. In its obvious temporal implication, it shored up the lament for the country (relegated also beyond the pale of cinematic representation) its ways of life and affective ties now ensconced within the collective memory of the community. But clearly the centrality of trauma complicates memory in this sense to resist its plenitude as the ‘other’ of the neurosis of the urbanization and atomization of the self in the face of the harsh realities of the city. Spatially, the ‘70s city could very well be charted out, as Vinay Lal meticulously inventories for *Deewar*, as signposting urban spaces and bringing into sharp relief its inherent inequities: between the docks, the footpath, the slum, the construction site where Vijay’s mother finds employment, the housing tenements, the squalid makeshift shelters under the bridge on the one hand and the school, the highrises and the five-star hotels on the other. These differentiated spaces and the right of access to them denominate the stakes of a conflict between two orders of existence condensed in *Deewar*’s fraternal conflict between the spatial community and its aspired for (but unattainable) entitlements and the temporal wedge driven into its path by its schizoid other that resists the transition. Lal’s classifications thus also qualify the urban with a liberating charge, an anonymity that allows for a release from the unforgiving intransience of the social order of “the village or the small

177 However it is possible to argue that this inscription of the trauma is markedly different from the psychotic figures played by Shahrukh Khan in the 1990s in that the latter is absolutely interiorized to the extent that the (anti) hero has no community or family ties, and the entire conflict in inward turned allowing for no endorsement by the populace, at least within the diagetic universe of the film. For an elaboration of this argument see Ranjani Mazumdar ‘From Subjectification to Schizophrenia: The ‘Angry Man’ and the ‘Psychotic’ Hero of Bombay Cinema’ in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, ed. Ravi Vasudevan, 2000.

town” 179 that retains the history of past humiliations (of their father’s fall from grace as a union leader who compromises his principles and his comrades to protect his family) and also a potential release from the bonds of memory.

The most crucial change that marked the cinema of the ‘70s from the former decades was in the populist nomination of the ‘angry young man’ as the bearer of the political aspirations of segments previously unrecognized by the mainstream’s privileging of aristocratic protagonists. Yet it was premised, as in the case of Bachchan’s star persona, on certain extra political (if one may use such a phrase) endorsements. In Prasad’s argument the gravitational pull of the star persona in Bachchan’s case was also capable of accumulating and mobilizing certain contemporary “political, aesthetic and institutional values” 180 geared towards the cognition of proletarian themes, and a stronger consolidation of the narrative against the diversifying tendencies of the earlier form of the ‘portmanteau social’ even as the latter remained the dominant form circumscribing and absorbing the possibilities of such experimentation in new directions. 181

The melodramatic schematization of the problem inherent in the crisis of legitimacy of the film form was resolved in the ‘70s (as argued by Madhava Prasad and others 182) by mapping an antagonistic confrontation between the state and the community. 183 The Bachchan persona derived its potency from the endorsement of the hitherto invisible (urban) masses by virtue of being a proletarian hero. But the curious configuration of the new narrative also

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179 Ibid. p. 61
180 Prasad, Ideology of the Hindi Film, p. 138.
181 The social in Prasad’s rendering was marked as the only genre which had a contemporary signified and its dominance: the capacity to absorb new innovations and resist dispersal into subgenres is proof of “a certain imperative that is peculiar to the modernizing Indian state.” Ideology of the Hindi Film, p. 136
182 See Karen Gabriel, Melodrama and the Nation: Sexual Economies of Bombay Cinema (1970–2000), 2010 and Ravi Vasudevan, The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema, 2010.—Valentina Vitali in Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies (2008) concedes to Prasad’s reading of the films centred upon Amitabh Bachchan’s vigilante figure and emphasizes that “the new narrative form—namely Salim-Javed scripts—placed new demands upon the star.”(p.189) Vitali however laments that film histories tend to ascribe a prominence to the star figure (earlier reserved for film authors and directors) for these films while overlooking imperatives of production that resulted in the recontextualization of certain existing elements from the genre of action cinema (Dara Singh films, for instance) for “first-run venues patronized also by the middle class and previously reserved for the melodramatic fare that defined, until the late 1960s, the industry’s central ground.”(p.185)
183 The most representative film of this tendency being Deewar (Yash Chopra, 1975).
simultaneously made him “a representative of the state” as in the case of Zanjeer (Prakash Mehra, 1973). Subsequently, and perhaps inevitably, the dual investment into Bachchan’s persona was split into two antagonistic protagonists, usually (estranged) brothers, most tendentially in the case of Deewar (Yash Chopra, 1974). The familial conflict between the brothers, on opposing sides of the law, represented, in Prasad’s words “a civil war between state and community” establishing “a field of conflict […] in which the state/citizen confronts the community/subject.”

Clearly in the films centred round the rebel vigilante figure, subaltern demands unrecognized by the state became visible through their articulation for the first time. It was in the collective endorsement in the figure of the hero that an alternative consensus was formed amongst the urban underclass. The logic behind this cohesive consensus was in the conception of this community solidarity, which in the absence of older kinship networks in the city, formed its own familial bonds. Prasad’s analysis of Deewar, in which the mother’s allegiance is torn between the two brothers, Vijay (Bachchan) the gangster and Ravi (Shashi Kapoor) his police officer brother, points out that:

The crisis of the state derives from the fact that the law, [embodied allegorically in the police officer brother] in its drive to desacralize and colonize the space of the community, faces a number of hurdles and rival political formations. The mother figure serves as a narrative surrogate for all such rival formations: the traditional family, the criminal underworld, the community of the devout. She represents the border between the law and these rival formations. […] She is thus a liminal figure who represents the resistance of the community to a reorganization of social space according to the laws of private property.

Thus, within the gender economy/dynamics of melodrama, the absence or loss of a father that had in the ’50s allowed for a temporary space to open up within the narrative for the relative agential autonomy of the woman came to be symbolic of

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184 Madhava Prasad Ideology of the Hindi Film, p. 145
185 Ibid., p. 150
a different sense of disorder in the ’70s. This violent erasure of the father’s order could be put at equilibrium by the end of the film through the reinstitution of the state machinery. The interim investment of communitarian energies channelled through the mother figure could thus redirect the import of a subjacent order, temporal and spatial, squarely back to the state thereby re-establishing the hyphen between nation and state within the space of film narrative. In the resolution proffered by the film one realm inevitably subordinated the other and established its discursive supremacy. But this quasi spatial marking out of discursive terrains was also caught in the inevitable temporal bind discussed earlier. The community, and Bachchan as its representative, were both constituted by their alliance with a past that requires to be obscured by a wilful amnesia and the residues of the past need to be ultimately erased if the state and the law are to take over. In Prasad’s reading above, the community in the city cohered emphatically as a catechristic category for all forms of resistance to the domineering reach of the state and the law as its instrument. It might at this juncture be worthwhile to look at the new forms of urban life that Bombay cinema was subsequently compelled to explore to complicate the function of the community in the city and unpack their political implications towards a slightly different direction.

Prasad, over three chapters that delineate the three major directions that were taken by Hindi cinema of the ’70s, shows how the realist imperative that was imposed repeatedly by the state on the popular cinema of the period found a more consolidated form in the FFC project— “Under the FFC aegis, realism became a national political project […] It was a realism devoted to the mapping of the land, producing the nation for the state, capturing the substance of the state’s boundaries.” Though the first film financed by the FFC, Bhuvan Shome (Mrinal Sen, 1969) managed to interrogate and subvert this very ambition of the state to colonize its frontiers, so to say, the impetus of this realist aesthetic was sustained in a number of subsequent films where the state sought to intervene into the feudal enclaves of the nation at large. These incursions had as their protagonist, witness,

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187 Prasad Ideology of the Hindi Film, p. 190
and agent a representative of the modernizing state in the characters whose testimony framed the gaze of the narrative into these recalcitrant heartlands. However, the problem as pointed out by Prasad was not the strangeness but rather the ‘proximity to the everyday world of the urban audience’\textsuperscript{188} [italics mine] of feudal networks. It was thus necessary that a distinct hierarchy be established between the state and the nation, and for the purposes of this distanciation the old order and its sites be marked out “in its entirety, as a world.”\textsuperscript{189} It was a structural necessity behind the establishment of this new hierarchy. It can be argued that though apparently this required in effect an act by the state of claiming spatially the land that is rightfully its own through these incursions into the peripheries of its territory that refused to yield, at another level it was in fact an attempt to temporalize the space in terms of its distance from the telos of the modernizing imperative. In the specific trajectory that Prasad follows however, he argues that the narratives had to be set in the past (for Ankur and Nishant, Shyam Benegal, 1974 and 1975 respectively) since to admit the contemporaneity of feudalism would be tantamount to admitting that the nation-state is not yet governed by contract, or in other words, that the promise coeval with independence had not yet been carried out, fulfilled. As such “the pastness of the feudal is a representational protocol which retroactively ‘proves’ the post feudal, contractual nature of the present.”\textsuperscript{190} The organic association between the intransience of feudal repression, violence and corruption had already been established with finality in the process of gradual clarification of this ‘developmental aesthetic’. The problem that presented itself to representing the city in its density thus lay in the persistence and proximity of purportedly similar rival networks of power within the already circumscribed peripheries of the city.

Before we go on to elaborate our problematic let us also briefly take account of the ‘afterlife’ of sorts of the ‘developmental aesthetic’ (that crystallized with the FFC project) in our contemporary period. When articulated in the drive towards accessing and reforming feudal residues within the nation in present day Bombay cinema, the narrative enframing of rival networks of power as other, recalcitrant

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid. p.193
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid. p.193
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid. p.197
sources of sovereignty is informed by the acknowledgement not of any incompatibility of the modernizing project with the structure and dominance of ‘non-modern’ networks of power in their undeniable co-existence, but rather with a sense of the imperfect implementation (caused by corruption among other factors) of the infrastructure of governance. One can cite countless examples of films made over the last two decades that locate deeply corrupt, vernacularized modes of state power working in tandem with feudal power enclaves in films like Gangajal (2003, Prakash Jha) or Shool (1999, E. Nivas) made specifically about the internal workings of criminalized politics in the state of Bihar.\textsuperscript{191} Of course with the passing of the FFC moment the specificity of the local that had once substantiated the object language of the nation in its regional hinterlands (in Shyam Benegal’s Ankur, 1974 or Nishant, 1975) is now put emphatically within qualifying parentheses: for example in the words of a young novelist in Welcome to Sajjanpur (Shyam Benegal, 2008), a series of events narrated by a driver to his boss over the space of a long drive from Bombay to Pune about his misadventures with the governmental system of disbursement of loans for rural development (Well Done Abba, Shyam Benegal, 2010), the reminiscences of university students (Hazaaron Khwaishen Aisi, Sudhir Mishra, 2005) or within the TRP battles of news networks in Peepli Li\textsuperscript{V}E (2010, Anusha Rizvi). This is an impetus that we will look at in closer detail in the following chapter. My immediate concern in this chapter is to locate the points of access to a framework that takes account of modes of political praxis of the everyday as represented in Bombay cinema that bypass the reformist impulse and make room for some entirely other register of investiture in the hero figure, which in turn has its consonances and convergences with the realpolitical\textsuperscript{192} lay of democracy in the city. What I am proposing is a different valence to the category of the community now unhinged from its past and propelled into a time of seamless banality of the present that cannot be

\textsuperscript{191} I must thank Jishnu Dasgupta for bringing to notice this consistent othering and criminalization of a mode of politics that is associated with the state of Bihar as an anti-democratic abyss under the governance of Laloo Prasad Yadav in a paper entitled ‘Oporadh O Oporayon’ presented at the Oitihasik series in 2008. Dasgupta also points to the repeated picturization of rogue elements in democratic politics attributed to politicians who are Bihari in name (Yadav) or in the manner of speech from films like Satta (2003, Madhur Bhandarkar) or Yuva (2004, Mani Ratnam)

effectively subsumed under this logic of the remnant of the past within the *a priori* diachrony of attaining modernity. It appears as an entirely new urban formation pragmatically negotiating and wresting its own conditions for existence whose boundaries are brought into sharper focus when we compare it with earlier cinematic configurations of the community.

In an essay on the mobility of the Bollywood(ized) film Ashish Rajadhyaksha refers to a divide “central to nationalism itself: the divide of democracy versus modernity.”\(^{193}\) Elaborating on this divide further in the appended footnote, he refers back to Partha Chatterjee’s notion of ‘civil’ versus ‘political society’, the respective characteristics of which are outlined as follows: “while modernity was the main agenda of the former [civil society], democracy could be seen as the main issue addressing the latter [political society]”.\(^{194}\) Prasad’s own essay ‘Back to the Present’\(^{195}\) (again not on cinema but on the imperatives of a post-colonial epistemic access to the nation at large) recounts some of the fundamental propositions put forth by Chatterjee: namely, first that the site of transformation shifts from the civil society to the political with the shift from the colonial to the post-colonial period. Second, the question framing the debates over social transformation becomes the question of democracy rather than modernity [thus spatial rather than temporal]. And third, that in the context of globalisation, there might emerge an opposition between these two frameworks, i.e. modernity and democracy, and their corresponding domains and agents i.e. between civil and political society. To enable a comfortable fit between the three successive sets of oppositions, Prasad’s state-community, Rajadhyaksha’s invocation of Chatterjee’s modernity-democracy, and Chatterjee’s civil and political society and chart out their implications on popular film (without getting into the complexities of political philosophy that does not explicitly refer to cinema but focus instead upon unpacking the specific nature of the post-colonial democracy that is India, often read as a vernacularization of the modular form of democracy), it is important to recall what was happening in the larger field of popular cinema in the ’70s. What the ‘developmental aesthetic’ had done in its temporal transposition of the feudal

\(^{193}\) Ashish Rajadhyaksha, The ‘Bollywoodization’ of Indian Cinema’ p.135
\(^{194}\) Ibid. p. 137, referring to Partha Chatterjee’s ‘Beyond the Nation or Within’
\(^{195}\) In *Cultural Dynamics*, July 1998.
was to elude ‘habits of politics’ which according to Sudipta Kaviraj had already infiltrated into the nation’s farthest reaches by this decade:

By the 1970s, however, the meaning of democracy had communicated itself to the predominantly peasant electorates who were less practised at seeing themselves as monadic individuals grouped into transient constellations of interests. Consequently *gemeinschaftlich* behaviour started emerging into the democratic political arena, altering the meanings and consequences of all democratic procedures and occasionally creating tensions between the individualistic premises of the legal-constitutional structure and the predominantly community-oriented self-understandings of large electoral groups. 196

Within the urban the persistence of these practices are delineated by Kaviraj, following Chatterjee, as such:

For the lowest strata of Indian society, associational channels, which depend on education and a certain lack of desperate necessity, are not easily available: their repertoire, which has considerable range, stretches from acceptance of patronage from politicians to wary support of local toughs; from political mendicancy to spontaneous violence. All the elements of this repertoire lie outside the definitions of associational ‘civility’. 197

Though these contingent political claims could be seen as those arising from *gemeinschaftlich* formations, the crucial thing to note is that these are not by any means residual networks of power, feudal or otherwise, but pragmatic and contingent associations brought into being precisely at the moment of redundancy of *gesellschaft* or civil society like prototypical associations. This is the fundamental conceptual shift that, I argue, categorically differentiates the theorization of these urban bodies from the earlier framework of recipients of reform in the crime melodrama of the ’50s and makes room for the new gangland films. This is thus also the specific temporal bind of the present moment and the foundational crisis

196 Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘In Search of Civil Society’ in *body.city: citing contemporary culture in India*, eds. Indira Chandrasekhar and Peter C. Seel, 2003, p.156
197 Ibid. p. 162
that generates the two trajectories of narrative-enframing and permissible narrative resolutions that I’m hinting at.

Let me also stress at this point that neither this reading, nor I, am so much constructing an opposition between a kind of indigenous, communitarian mode of existence pitted against the universalized, individualist mode of existence as heuristic categories to theorize a fundamental opposition inherent to the nature of democracy that is India. Rather I invoke this binary solely for the purpose of enframing space and narrative in cinema. In this reading the former category would correspond loosely to my second framework (pointing to an alternative praxis of politics) and the latter to my first framework (privileging the new middle class).

Let me also clarify that while I am trying to demonstrate a cinematic genealogy of the binary between the transposed village/community and nucleated city, the inside and outside so to speak, as instrumental in mapping and managing the nation for desired narrative resolutions, let me stress once again that the discursive accumulation and thrust of the two moments juxtaposed here (the present and the ’70s as its original blueprint, as well as other moments intervening serially in between) are quite different in terms of the socio-political incumbencies of the moments in question. In the ’70s investiture in the rebel hero was necessitated and overdetermined by the need to first, have a proletariat hero to address a vacuum created by the political crisis of the era—the various radical energies in politics challenging the populistic reach of the Indian National Congress, as well as the pervasive sense of disenfranchisement in the poor on a national scale; and second, the need for an inviolable and invulnerable authority in the figure of the hero that would compensate for the aggressive biopolitics of governance of the Emergency era (for example, in the incursions into the remoter heartlands of the nation for the implementation of forced sterilization programmes). The authoritative state under the leadership of Indira Gandhi on the one hand brutally repressed all opposition while at the same time harnessing support from local movements and the popular mobilization of contingent constituencies, most

Karen Gabriel attributes the invention of the vigilante déclassé hero as a curiously twisted expression of the resistance of the times against the state and its repressive machinery which was also at the same time driven to reproduce the very nature of violent authority represented by the state. See Melodrama and the Nation: Sexual Economies of Bombay Cinema (1970–2000) (2010).
prominently through the actions of the Youth Congress led by Sanjay Gandhi to bolster the position of the state, through which a new kind of allegedly lumpenized politics was being fashioned. The hero figure was thus caught in a deeply ambivalent relationship to state power. The invocation of communitarianism in the ’70s could thus lend itself to a statist reading, pace Vinay Lal, who locates in it a renewal of faith in the ideal of an efficient and just state machinery.

IV Premonitions or Spatial Interruptions

A rather late residual instantiation of Amitabh Bachchan’s angry young man persona occurs in Mukul S. Anand’s Agneepath (1990). Agneepath marks the continuity of several of the iconic traits and narrative strains; but yet, show certain distinct deviations or innovations, not in the construction of Bachchan’s subaltern rebel figure, but in the organization of the space around him. Agneepath was made at a time when grave doubts were being expressed in the industry about the capacity of Amitabh Bachchan as a ‘megastar’ to ensure box-office success; not least because the cinematic memory of the 1970s in the form of the “Deewar spectre ha[d]n’t ceased to haunt Bachchan’s directors.”199 I quote from a Filmfare article from May 1990, one of many published between ’89 and ’91:

For once Bachchan looked totally unconvincing taking up cudgels for the downtrodden.[…] [Agneepath was criticised for being] no different from the innumerable guilt-ridden, vengeful, trigger-happy introverts Bachchan has been playing since the Zanjeer-Deewar days. Though he invests the character with a few interesting mannerisms, the inner physiognomy of [Vijay] Sawant is untouched. He’s the same man whose father was humiliated and destroyed by a “cruel” society, whose mother walks the streets ridiculed and humiliated at every step, and who, vowing to avenge his father’s death and restore his mother’s pride, turns into a cold blooded criminal.200

199 Life after Agneepath, Filmfare May 1990, p.40
200 Ibid.
What was evident was not just the depreciation of Bachchan as a star but a crisis of the cinematic persona that he had come to represent. Bachchan’s avenger persona by this time had been supplemented with super-heroic qualities for a series of films (Shahenshah, Toofan, Jaadugar, Ganga Jamuna Saraswati) that, in spite of their occasional box-office success, was routinely derogated by the press as crowd-pleasers targeted at a lower class audience. Bachchan himself from the mid-80s had made attempts to refurbish his image working in collaboration with Javed Akhtar (of the Salim-Javed duo responsible for the invention of his brooding angry young man persona in Deewar, Zanjeer and Sholay) in a small budget film Main Azad Hoon, and later with Ketan Mehta for Kartoons; the latter however had to be abandoned due to an impractically large budget.

Agneepath made at this point was in itself a concatenation of several old and new trends of the time incorporated to ensure box-office success. Made at a juncture where the bound script was yet to become recognized industrial practice, the film does in fact exhibit symptoms of a rather haphazard cornucopia of elements typical of a period of imminent transition: the most critiqued of these was the inclusion of the character of Krishnan Iyer, a Tamil coconut vendor (Filmfare said “the bow to vulgarity was even more pronounced [...] with Mithun Chakraborty playing an uncouth nariyelwala. Was Bachchan trying to succeed at any cost?”), who saves Vijay’s life when he is shot by his bosses and who is subsequently embraced by Vijay’s mother as her “good son.” Krishnan’s character also becomes the excuse for a romantic subplot in which Vijay’s aggressively Westernized sister Siksha is domesticated into a demure Indian girl, but nonetheless provides the occasion for a few songs, like a disco number shot on a nightclub set with strobe lights and fog-machines. The film also uses picturesque

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201 Bachchan’s attempts at changing his image and doing something more creative and substantial date back to the mid 1980s, before he ventured into politics. After he had recovered from an attack of myasthenia gravis, he had shown a willingness to work with directors from the parallel cinema, like Ketan Mehta and Govind Nihalani. But things didn’t jell,” film distributor Balakrishna Shroff, quoted in ‘The Bachchan Blast,’ Filmfare March 1991, p. 31


203 Mithun Chakraborty had shot to fame following his appearance in Disco Dancer (1982, Babbar Subhash).
shots of Mauritius\textsuperscript{204}, most notably in a chase sequence where Terelene, one of Vijay’s villainous ex-bosses, follows Vijay’s red Cadillac on its way to another crimelord’s seaside mansion in a helicopter along a tree lined highway, cross cut with exotic dancers on the beach to a Mory Kanté hit song ‘Yé ké yé ké (which was climbing the international charts at the time) that Bachchan wanted to incorporate in the film. Willeman and Rajadhyaksha’s entry for the film in the \textit{Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema}, also points out the currencies of anachronism in the visual idiom of the film which combines “Mukul Anand’s usual fast moving camera and distorted perspectives” with occasional interruptions of “early cinematic idioms” in the form of “the foot stomping song picturisation of Archana Puran Singh’s Alibaba song.” \textsuperscript{205} The latter song also included a gratuitous appearance from actor Shakti Kapoor playing himself, who dances, sings and signs an autograph for a guest at the party.

But, for a genre that had apparently suspended the country-city duality inherent in an earlier convention of the social by producing an ersatz domain of community and kinship among the urban poor (and symbolically invested in the figure of the mother) \textit{Agneepath} persists in positing the past in a village beyond the periphery of the city. Within the pristine space of the village, Mandwa, development is anticipated in the form of electricity and other amenities that Vijay’s idealist schoolmaster father Dinanath has managed to bring in through his efforts. When the chief engineer for the project of electricity arrives, Dinanath takes him around the village and this sequence tabulates instances of his relentless personal efforts at reform within Mandwa. Even as they stop by a small school run by Dinanath, he pursues a village drunkard to give up alcohol and assume responsibility for his family, reproaches a woman for disposing garbage on the street and later takes on the task of educating a \textit{tawaif} at her \textit{kotha} to stop her from destroying families, corrupting the youth and luring his students into sin. Unbeknownst to him,

\textsuperscript{204} The incorporation of foreign locales was also bolstered by concessions from several governments offered to the film industry in recognition of the “Bollywood effect” which resulted in “dramatic increases in tourist arrivals from India” Ganti notes in \textit{Producing Bollywood}, “after several Hindi Films have shot in a particular region.” “[R]epresentatives of tourism promotion boards and film councils” from countries like Switzerland, Malaysia, Germany, South Africa, Scotland and Finland approached the film industry “offering incentives, such as all-expense-paid scouting trips, monetary subsidies, tax breaks, technical and logistical assistance and co-production arrangements.” p. 255

\textsuperscript{205} Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, \textit{Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema}, p. 454
however, he falls prey to a plan hatched by local landlord Dinkar Rao who resents the prospect of development for fear of losing power over the village. In these, the film reveals traces of the impulse for reform that still aligns it with the ’70s films. The real threat to the subsumption of this rural space under the overseeing beneficent gaze of the state (mediated in the figure of the reformist Dinanath) however is presented not by the residual feudal figurehead Dinkar Rao but an external force in the form of smuggler Kancha Cheena (played by Danny Denzongpa), whose centre of operations is based in Mauritius. Kancha seeks control of Mandwa as passing point for his freight of smuggled drugs precisely because, as he puts it, the village in spite of its proximity to Bombay is only nominally on the map of Hindustan as a space beyond the reach of the law of the state. At a latter point of the film when Vijay visits Kancha at his Mauritius den and asks for a share in his smuggling trade in Mandwa, Kancha asks Vijay what he finds so special about the village. Vijay, suppressing his real motive, produces an answer that reveals an extra-cinematic topical cognizance of the aporias of state control in the country: that he seeks nothing more in Mandwa than an enterprising criminal can possibly seek in Shimoga, Daman, Porbandar, Jaisalmer or Kohima. *Agneepath* presents a haptic, discontinuous and violent diorama of Bombay from the time when Vijay, along with his mother and sister, leaves the village in a boat moving towards the city and vows to return to Mandwa to put things right. Bombay is introduced through a vertical downwards pan along a lamppost at a street crossing, ironically bearing a carving of the four lions of Ashoka’s capital to reveal a huddle of destitute children at its base. This is also where Vijay encounters Bombay’s underworld, represented by a curious coalition of gangsters of markedly different ethnic origins: Tereline, Anna Shetty, and Usman Bhai (perhaps in a parodic criminal obverse of the brothers Amar, Akbar and Anthony from the eponymous film made by Manmohan Desai in 1977) who conspire together and hire an assassin from the street to knife Kancha Cheena. The assassin fails as Kancha’s car escapes in a melee of traffic, and the incident is witnessed by Vijay who picks up the knife. Bombay henceforth unfolds in relentless visceral chaos around the young Vijay. The same night a group of young hooligans appear

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206 The national emblem of India accompanied by the inscription ‘Satyameva jayate’ or ‘Truth alone triumphs.’
and rummage through the meagre possessions of those sleeping on the street under
the same lamp-post that had appeared in the opening shot of Bombay. Vijay sits
hunched and brooding under it with the knife in his hand. Left of screen Vijay
raises the knife a fraction, catching its glint the hooligans drop their loot and
disperse swiftly. The city henceforth is represented almost solely in a dense
succession of random acts of violence witnessed and soon perpetrated by the
young Vijay. Vijay’s mother Suhasini is molested by Kancha’s stooge Gora
(who’s literally white skinned, played by Bob Christo in the film) and Vijay
intervenes to rescue her and throws a stone at her assailant. Vijay is turned away
at the local police station when he tries to lodge a complaint. Learning the
partiality of the machinery of the law to the rich capable of proffering a bribe,
Vijay performs his first act of extra-legal revenge by setting fire to Kancha’s
petrol pump. This act becomes his official initiation into crime on several
registers. He is arrested by Senior Inspector Gaitonde thus starting a rather
ambivalent long term acquaintance with a representative of the law.
Simultaneously, the three criminal bosses—Tereline, Anna Shetty and Usman
Bhai—Kancha’s rivals, impressed by the rumour that the young boy has destroyed
one of Kancha Cheena’s properties, i.e. the petrol pump, together decide to pay
for Vijay’s bail and take him under their wing.
Interestingly, the burn scar that Vijay incurs while burning down the petrol pump
resurfaces at his first meeting with Kancha in Mauritius. Instead of the originary
scarring of the shaming tattoo in Deewar, this mark short circuits the revenge
drama (as much as it supplements Vijay’s original drive) with an intermediary
inscription of an essentially urban regime of violence thus in a way making room
for the thickening of urban space in its own specific banality in succeeding films
of the gangland genre.
The child actor Manjunath playing the part of the young Vijay increasingly
embodies the hyperbolic performative tropes of the grown up Bachchan: his
gestures, emblematic postures and diction. This bodily inscription on Manjunath
proleptically makes room for Bachchan’s entry later in the film thus facilitating a
seamless time lapse across twenty-four years which testifies to the film’s reliance
on the iconicity of cinematic accumulation in spite of its professed attempts to
veer away from Bachchan’s image (the most marked of which was the
approximation of Manya Surve’s voice by Amitabh Bachchan which had caused the film to be a commercial failure at its release.\textsuperscript{207} Vijay, twelve years of age, facing Inspector Gaitonde in his office, through a time-lapse, is replaced by an adult Vijay (Age: 36 years, 9 months, 8 days, says Vijay) facing Commissioner Gaitonde, who tries to warn him of his bosses’ plot to have him killed because he had refused to smuggle drugs.

The underworld, like the city itself, does not still quite cohere without the mediation of Vijay, or Bachchan’s gravitational pull. Vijay’s bosses congregate and socialize together in spaces in half shadow cut through by slanting rays of sunlight and a recurrent aural motif of telephones (large heavy handsets true to the time) ringing incessantly even over dialogues being spoken. A miasma like wreath of fog or smoke perpetually hangs over spaces at the dockyard, outside Vijay’s mother’s house or within the tight lanes of slums. Assassinations (thrice in the film) are accompanied by cars rolling in from all directions into the frame, into each other’s paths. The gunning down of Vijay himself by his bosses happens at a nondescript docking port in daylight, with a similar medley of cars waiting in ambush, in the middle of which Vijay drives in and offers himself up. The sequence is cross cut with extreme close ups of guns, exhaust pipes of cars belching smoke, and a bridge that can be seen in deep focus at a long distance from the dock over which freight lorries roll by at a normal everyday pace. The experiential density of the urban, the gritty palpability of the pace and chaos of the city, and the banality of its daily machinery indifferent to the fate of its inhabitants can be clearly seen as beginning to make their presence felt in the body of the text by this time with the mediation of new film-makers like Mukul Anand.

Onscreen spaces become increasingly haptic in this period, somewhat analogic with the effects of a Dolby stereo system. Rather than internalizing the spectator...
(in the manner of classical Hollywood cinema, say) the camera lets the spectator’s eye move into the space (following the establishing shot) following a narrative effect loosely in place. There is a distinct premonition of this visceral disorientation in Agneepath, where the star-body facilitates the gradual re-organization of spaces around it. Bachchan’s presence thus actually centres the space, from a visceral exploration of the city experience intercut between numerous spaces, which slowly come together around him. This kind of baroque excess, almost figurally a lack of a centre, a crowded periphery, would continue in the gangland films to follow. This roving eye (use of a Steadicam) constituted at the cost of losing the focused eye, would find an exemplary use in Ram Gopal Varma’s Shiva (1989, Telegu), for instance, in an uninterrupted incessant movement in the chase sequence to a classroom. The sound of cellphones in Company (Ram Gopal Varma, 2002), similarly functions to connect disconnected spaces through sound, against the planned disorienting randomness of camera movement, and in the way camera angles change between shots. The lack of centre becomes the operative mode in the representation of the city in Satya too, where after the short-lived comfort of recognizing Victoria Terminus in the opening shot the spaces that break out are utterly haptic, unrecognizable and disorienting.

Agneepath also constantly stresses a much larger populist investment in Vijay, if somewhat incongruously, in an army of male followers clad in white shirts and pants who congregate around Vijay at every turn. More significantly, when Vijay is looked down upon by upper-class diners at an elite restaurant, he lashes out at them and brings his fiancée (a nurse from the hospital who had taken care of him after he was shot and later provides solace and shelter when Vijay’s mother berates him for his criminal turn) over to the poorer section of the town where he is welcomed by young and old alike.

The only physical space in the film which betrays any kind of a communitarian sense of territoriality within the slums is when Vijay’s sister is abducted by Anna Shetty, the Tamil underworld boss and the last surviving member of the criminal triumvirate that had betrayed Vijay. Anna’s den is a warehouse roofed in asbestos, an akhira where bare bodied Tamil men practice sparring with swords. In the slum,
a dense space surrounding the *akhra*, its residents, men and women alike, resist the police, armed with domestic utensils, sticks and stones and are in turn trampled underfoot by the police.

The very next film from Mukul S Anand, *Hum* (1991), with Amitabh Bachchan once more in the lead, is constituted like *Agneepath*, by ingenuous acts of borrowing elements from a larger domain of cultural references including a fight in a pub between Tiger’s stepbrothers Vijay and Kumar (played by Govinda and Rajnikant) with a gang of ex-army skinheads choreographed to the ‘Batman Medley’ by Prince from the soundtrack of *Batman* (1989, Tim Burton). But more significant than these chance accruals, *Hum* also takes as its locale the industrial fringe of the city, more specifically, a dockyard under the control of a gangster, Bhaktavar (played again by Danny Denzogpa), which shows the further crystallization of a more viscerally industrial city space. Tiger’s milieu, resides literally in the nooks and crannies of an industrial backdrop, its spaces hollowed out of and fashioned from urban industrial detritus. Its daily rhythms are set to the blare of fog-horns at the dockyard. The ‘Jumma Chumma’ song (originally conceived for Kancha Cheena’s moll in *Agneepath*) in *Hum* is shot in a ramp constructed in an actual abandoned factory (Suresh Mills) instead of a phantasmagoric set. Its backdrop of pulleys and rails are just another instance of real space filtering into screen space in this period.

The departures from the earlier Bachchan films at the most obvious level can be identified by the fact that Bachchan’s angry young man is called Tiger instead of Vijay. His father is no longer the victim but the underling of the Don himself. The betrayal by substitute father figures in the city that appeared only halfway through *Agneepath* where the past was already tied to the village becomes in *Hum*, a generational conflict within the urban fringe itself.

Tiger’s antagonism to the Don is motivated by the fact that his lover Jumma’s brother Gonsalves, an activist for the welfare of the dockworkers, finds his attempts at organizing the dockworkers against exploitation repeatedly thwarted by the Don and that Gonsalves himself is eventually killed by him. Tiger’s initial
generational conflict of sorts thus gets inflected with the desire for revenge and retribution. Interestingly, the major twist in the plot occurs when a corrupt inspector dissuades Tiger from killing Bhaktavar, urging him to flee instead. Once Tiger flees, the inspector kills Bhaktavar’s wife and child by burning them alive and makes away with money and other valuables from Bhaktavar’s safe. Bhaktavar is taken into police custody by the time he gains consciousness and believing that it was Tiger who had burnt down his house and killed his wife and son, swears revenge. Tiger escapes on a freight train with his two half-brothers while Jumma, refusing to complicate his life any further, stays behind. In the second half of the film Tiger, who has changed his name to Shekhar, is shown leading a life of respectable normalcy in a small happy family consisting of his two step-brothers Vijay and Kumar, and Vijay’s wife and daughter. The difference of this pastoral home in Ooty from Tiger’s past life in the dystopic industrial backdrop of the city is starkly emphasized. The very first shot in the second half of the film that follows right after the exodus of the family on a freight train is that of an aged Tiger waking up from a nightmare in the middle of the night while a thunderstorm is raging outside and the blades of a windmill spin menacingly on the right hand side of the frame outside his window. The spinning blades momentarily seem like an ominous reminder of the looming machines, ships and loading cranes of the first half but the impression is dispelled in subsequent sequences of happy family life in an idyllic space removed both from the absent rural and the industrial urban.

The fact that like Agneepath, Hum also goes to supplement the effort to rehabilitate Bachchan’s star persona against his political discredit is perhaps most transparently evident in the narrative accommodation of the corrupt inspector who goes on to become a business magnet who supplies spurious tanks to the government, as a reference to the Bofors scandal involving Bachchan. As just redressal, Tiger and his brothers intervene to blow up a fleet of spurious tanks, an act that also takes the life of the villainous policeman turned industrialist at the end of the film.
While succeeding other violent city films like *Raakh* (Aditya Bhattacharya, 1988), *Tezaab* (N. Chandra, 1989) and *Parinda* (Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1989) which were already initiating a rhetoric of representing the city as a dystopic and relentless antagonist to the individual, *Agneepath* and *Hum* both straddled a set of still unresolved choices and uncertainties that would subsequently ramify into more rigorously differentiated genres in the following decade.

The remake of *Agneepath* (Karan Malhotra, 2012) as a tribute to the earlier film serves to illustrate the transitions that I’ve attempted to outline in the section above. On the one hand it refers to, and in the process invokes, the ‘cult status’ of the earlier production. On the other, it mobilizes the inevitable visual and narrative tropes of the gangland film which are brought into the service of resuscitating an older narrative organization that cannot organically be sustained within the constraints of the present day gangland film.

The narrative centre of *Agneepath* redux cannot quite contain the gangland film, this centre has to be located in the original *Agneepath*, now read unambiguously as a revenge drama, and faithfully reproduced as such. *Agneepath* (2012) thus temporally locates itself in the moment of the process of deferral of subsumption by the state (ideally cleansed of corruption, the potential for which is implanted in the figure of Inspector, and later Commissioner, Gaitonde, whom Vijay calls on the phone and confesses “*apne abba ki yaad dilate hai aap*” (you remind me of my father). But this temporal moment is translated spatially as befitting the territorial anxieties of the state in our contemporary time. The fantasy of inclusion, mediated by surveillance and action from an aggressive state machinery is thus also temporally stretched back to the Emergency, a moment where in actuality the populace is still reeling from the violence of an authoritarian state, a moment when state action or violence is not deflected only towards segments marked criminal, antisocial, or terrorist—to use a more apt contemporary epithet.

At the very beginning of *Agneepath* (2012) a ticker tape rolling out from a telegraph machine qualifies the timeline already printed in documentary mode on bottom right of the screen (“1977, Mandwa Village, Maharashtra”) and inflicts

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208 From title card preceding the film: “Revisiting, restructuring and adapting Agneepath is our humble way of paying homage to a film that has acquired cult status over the years...” signed by Karan Johar, on behalf of Dharma Productions (also the producer to the 1994 *Agneepath*), founded by Johar’s father Yash Johar.
the moment with an added political charge that was emphatically absent from the original *Agneepath*. Addressed to “Dinanath Chauhan, Mandwa Village”, it announces “Emergency revoked. Stop. Salt factory permission passed.” As a direct missive from the state (it is not clear who the sender is) the post-Emergency nation seems to be already micro-managed under a Gandhian ideal of rural self-sustenance. Dinanath directly cites Gandhi to Vijay (imploring non-violence) while he breaks up a fight between the children over a handful of coins earned by them from breaking an auspicious *matka*, or pot, during the festivities celebrating the imminent salt factory. The most radical break is in transmogrifying Kancha Cheena’s figure as the hyperbolic villain—shot throughout the film in foreshortened or skewed perspectives such that his figure looms larger than life over the frame, not quite human (played by a bald and bulked up Sanjay Dutt, a tattoo at the base of his skull, ear pierced on top, and dressed in black). His specific neurosis is to quote incessantly from the *Gita*: in itself a convolution and perversion of the Gandhian bent (and hence structurally contrasted to Dinanath—who is the bearer of the norm as well as the moral fulcrum of the film—in the segments following Kancha’s appearance onscreen for the first time). Predictably then, Kancha as the villain is no longer a smuggler from outside based in Mauritius but the son of Dinkar Rao, i.e. not an external threat to the integrity of the nation’s territorial borders, but the warped progeny of a deeply corrupt feudal order.

The ellipsis in historical time, ominously, occurs following a narrative ellipsis of fifteen years (propelling Vijay from childhood to adulthood), at the end of which Bombay logically should be caught squarely in the aftermath of the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. Bombay in *Agneepath* (2012) is lambent but for the epic rivalry for territory between smuggler overlords Rauf Lala and Kancha Cheena. Mandwa in Police Commissioner Gaitonde’s accounts, when he presents a slideshow of photographs from the police files for a meeting, is picturized exactly like a war ravaged land—in the manner of documentary footage captured after a bomb blast or riot—a state of exception, *not* in Bombay, but in a remarkable sleight of historical amnesia as perpetrated by the machinations of Kancha Cheena. A lighthouse, that dominates the landscape of a bleak, dusty, colour-leached barren coastline of Mandwa like a watchtower, is not a structure
Kancha uses for surveillance but rather symbolizes the aporia of state surveillance and control in the police slides. In a more telling flicker of historical memory, Rauf Lala, towards the climax of the film, made aware of Vijay’s betrayal drags his sister to a thoroughfare and proceeds to auction her off to a gallery of lecherous Arabs. It is at this juncture that the community, Vijay’s contingent family, descends to protect her honour in the form of a group of eunuchs dressed in sarees (draped in the manner of the militant Marathi Sherawali) armed with raised flashing swords wreaking havoc on the Muslim crowd, dispersing it and dispensing death all around.

The gap in the narrative is the past: Vijay’s past that escapes the knowledge regime of police files. Vijay’s past that is also the sole motivating factor for narrative progression. Without it Gaitonde can attribute no motive to either Vijay’s actions or his ambitions. Memory that bears weight of time past cannot be adequately contained in or be explained by the present.

Perhaps because Agneepath’s remake is always already mediated by the cinematic memory of its predecessor, Bombay is communally fluid; it doesn’t cohere as dense palpable space. Neither Vijay, nor the film, is overwhelmed by the visceral proximity of the big city that had exploded in chaos around the child Vijay upon his arrival in the original film, or spun out of control in terms of representation. Vijay here switches identarian markers as smoothly and efficiently as if they were nothing but costumes when he takes on the mantle of Rauf Lala’s empire in a black sherwani and Lala’s own shoes (that Vijay had stealthily slipped on beside his hospital bed while Lala is incapacitated after his son’s demise). Vijay oscillates constantly between distinctly coded communitarian sartorial markers throughout the film that neither signifies a shift of allegiance nor a conscious strategy on his part to manipulate his followers. The new Agneepath’s return to an earlier paradigm of revenge directed towards a feudal past located elsewhere makes any specificity of the milieu Vijay is propelled into in the big city quite unnecessary.

Agneepath’s remake appears after the consolidation of the gangland genre. In Hollywood terminology it can be classified as a gangland exploitation film of sorts; a film that reproduces the symptoms of the genre without necessarily addressing or working out the causes behind them.
For example, popular investiture in the figure of the hero is a fact taken for granted and does not require narrative elaboration. The hero is not embedded in any specific context.

The rupture presented by the gangland films also enables the remake to read its original as aligned to the state’s reclamation of the city and its peripheries (the village of Mandwa to be precise, appearing here as an obverse of Mumbai.) The parallel or resistant networks of power in the city are pressed to the service of relaying state power. The original Agneepath made at a period of transformation harboured the potential for the transformation of both narrative and modes of representation. It contained premonitions of the dissolution of the country-city binary, and to some extent of its recasting within the space of the city (in the popular investiture centred on the hero, and in the depiction of urban space.) The remake, however, chooses to ignore these traits. Spaces are mapped in opposition, between Mumbai the city, and Mandwa its stubbornly feudal periphery. The narrative is unilaterally read as one of retribution.

Agneepath (2012) thus intercepts and arrests the function of memory and domesticates it by bypassing and harnessing altogether gangland Bombay’s rogue traits embedded within a dense and tense present.

My contention is that this oppositional arrangement (between the country and city, community and law) reaches a narrative cul-de-sac in the late ‘80s with a series of films in which the state’s mandate can no longer be brought to a denouement in the face of ambiguous urban communities, even symbolically (the classic example of which of course being when the police arrive late once the epic confrontation between the déclassé vigilante hero and the villain has already taken place). The normative aspirations of the state in these series of films are invested in a younger sibling or a son returning to India following a sojourn abroad only to alight upon insurmountable community networks. The protagonist faces a matrix of ersatz kinship and/or communitarian configurations of power represented, quite predictably, by an older brother or an elderly patriarch. Taking two films as representative of each scenario, we can cite for example, Parinda (Vidhu Vinod
Chopra, 1989) as the instantiation of the tussle between the terminal irreconcilability of modes of life that the brothers have committed to (if not a conflict between the brothers themselves) and *Virasat* (Priyadarshan, 1997) as that of a generational negotiation. Both move towards the annihilation of the future citizen, if only in a slightly muted version in the latter where the protagonist catches a train to give himself up to the police after having slain the almost ontologically belligerent feudal antihero.

The moment of crisis encapsulated in this narrative impasse is resolved by the generic dispersal of its opposing drives into two subsequent genres that will increasingly congeal in the following period. The community solidarity that had originally provided the backbone of the ‘aesthetics of mobilization’ (Madhava Prasad’s term) had even then come to be identified negatively (in the necessity that it be neutralized by the end); or by virtue of its location in the countryside, was associated with a regressive feudal world-view; spatially distinguished as a recalcitrant site in the ‘aesthetics of development’. From the time of the narrative impasse that I point to, however, the crisis is mapped squarely across the city of violence. The country-city duality, even when the village was nothing more than a spectral memory of a previous life, is acutely problematized in this period as the antagonism is mapped anew in an agonistic opposition. It becomes a tussle over the frame to be used in making meaning of the city space, an epistemic contest over a common site of inhabitation and dystopia. The spatial schematization implied by the city-country divide in the ‘developmental aesthetic’ had also by extension imposed an inescapable temporal dimension onto the divide. While on the one hand the developmental impetus indicated the cannibalistic reach of the ordering principle of the city, and by extension, of the nation’s modernizing gaze

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209 Lalitha Gopalan in *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Cinema* (2002) looks at the gangster genre as marked by its “obsession with both the past and brutal power [which] allow us to see it as a site of writing the nation, as well as performing it” in which “biographies of gangster protagonists are analogous to biographies of the post-colonial state.” (p.107) Gopalan reads *Parinda*, a film principally funded by the NFDC, as reflecting “the changing relationship between state, industry, and audience as a series of accommodations that inflected the form of Indian popular cinema at the interstices of global and national styles” (p.145) as well as an attempt by director Chopra to bridge the gap between commercial and parallel cinema. While Gopalan focuses on the use of flashbacks creating a fractured temporality in the film, she observes the ambivalent status of high-angle shots (of the city, and of key events, such as the murder of the younger brother and his bride in their nuptial bed on a yacht) that constantly punctuate the film and tend to gravitate towards a point of view dominated by the gang world.
(for want of a better phrase), it also in the same move established the city and its putatively ordered present tense as a telos to be desired for and implemented upon the peripheries of the city. It was in fact its all-encompassing need to absorb, subsume and assimilate its others that it faced a crisis in encountering insurmountable resistance from these remote enclaves of arcane power hierarchies. On the other hand, for the community-state split within the city itself, the temporal schema incorporated a yet absent tense—of the abstracted, as yet unrealized (again, in the sense of made real) future. For the prodigal sons of the soil in both *Virasat* and *Parinda* returning from abroad this future is arrested and annihilated before fruition. Their worlds thus mapped out over abstracted spatial terrains show spaces stuck anachronistically in segregated time warps, each awaiting its turn in the grand temporal schema of the ordering grid. This reading of fractured temporalities with their own individual *bildungsromans* being hatched to unfold in order would be far simple if there were in fact no contest over the legitimacy of the trajectory itself. What in fact the density of these spaces increasingly show is that not only is the trajectory near impossible to carry out given the local arrangements of power but that these matrices *demand* a different logic of fruition altogether. The experiential density of the city in a film like *Parinda* is thus also weighed down by the incumbent pressure of temporality, of accumulated past time hurtling towards the *temp morte* of the present, a stasis to possible action, an ethical vacuum.

It is with the violent films that we find that the density of detail in the city (as also the village and suburbia defined as its others) attains critical mass.

“*Vijay Dinanath Chauhan pura naam* [full name], *maa ka naam* [mother’s name] *Suhasini Chauhan*, [village] *gaon Mandwa*” was Bachchan’s refrain from *Agneepath*—it is precisely this umbilical tie to the past and a sense of an-other space of origin (though defiled) that *Satya* severs in unanchoring its protagonist to bodily propel him into the chaotic space of the Bombay underworld. *Satya* evacuates time and therefore memory and enters *in medias res* into the present. This was its unique moment *in potentia* diluted through repetition. The gaping lack of memory in *Satya* was therefore a necessary rupture, monumental in cinematic terms, for inventing the gangland genre.
As Bombay emerges as a real place (as against a space which invites territorialization by a favoured constituency) of ruinous debris of urban life in excess to melodramatic requirements, several cinematic strategies of apprehending this haptic topography of ruins and destruction nestling beyond the reaches of constitutional law begin to constellate in commercial Bombay cinema.

V The Double Take on the Past
What makes our retrospective exercise into the origins of a violent cityscape in popular cinema especially interesting is the fortuitous release of two films, *Once Upon a time in Mumbai* (Milan Luthria) and *City of Gold* (Mahesh Manjrekar) in 2010, both of which mirror my retrospective look by carrying out the same movement of looking into the past to situate this precise aetiological moment of political crisis in the 1970s. My argument follows the narrative and organizational logic of these two films (both of which turn their retrospective gaze onto the ’70s and ’80s in excavating the secret history of the birth of organized crime in Bombay) albeit in a markedly different manner.

The relevance of this move to my project in this chapter is in the lens of the present it offers in reading the period of the ’70s and its specific configuration of the country-city binary, the terms on which the conceptualization of violence and the deviant rebel hero *vis a vis* an urban community can take place, the potentials implicit in it and the incipient transformations that all this undergoes in the decades following the ’70s.

In this I seek to demonstrate why it is necessary to evoke an earlier moment to configure these particular registers of deviance and criminality within the representational domain of the contemporary urban, and identify the specific valence of violence that can be held to be in common between two historic moments separated by the considerable distance of four eventful decades. In the process I take account of the gradual and often chancy accrual of inflections to the notion of violence through these four decades to arrive upon the present.

To this purpose I loosely adopt Hans Robert Jauss’ concept of a ‘horizon of expectations’ which determines the ways in which a text is received in any given time. Though Jauss uses this term to point to the limits of interpretation of literary texts which might depend on the prevalent discourses of literariness, the moral
codes circumscribing the moment in time where a text is read (which might vary between different times), the expectations and rules gleaned from the readers’ familiarity with similar texts previously perused, etc. —I extend the idea of the horizon to the imperatives on production, in our case cinematic production itself, such that the rhetoric of representation within a genre is generated, governed and limited by these codes. Jauss’ formulation is especially productive in bringing to the fore the semiotic limits of each period in question and enables the comparison of two moments of reception of a text, or, by extension, perhaps even a genre separated in time. The notion of the horizon here also refers back to and informs the operations of Martin Lefebvre’s errant peripatetic eye in the previous chapter.

The first of these two films is Milan Luthria’s *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (henceforth *OUATIM*), released in 2010. Like *Deewar*, *OUATIM* is rumoured to be a biography of Haji Mastan Mirza. The style of representation in *OUATIM* is a consistent hyperbolization of the messianic nature of the hero, nothing less than a hagiography in fact. It does not replicate the ’70s idiom which is no longer in circulation other than in a carefully parenthesized retro mode: for instance, in the title sequence of *Johnny Gaddar* (2007, Shriram Raghavan) or in the ludic pastiche of *Dabangg* (2010, Abhinav Kashyap). *OUATIM*’s style is nonetheless mediated by the canonization of the idiom in the interim period (not least I suspect through countless instances of academic and journalistic analyses as well) through which *Deewar*, and several other films that can be grouped under the ‘aesthetics of mobilization’, had already entered the sphere of citability. It is also made possible by the fact that by this time cinema provides the necessary optic, a cognitive framework, for making sense of the city and had generated at the same time its own plethora of myths about the Bombay underworld. The purchase between these two moments of time in cinema is especially productive in providing a particular lens (of the present) it offers in reading ’70s *cinema* (i.e. not the actual historical period but its representation) in two ways: first, as that of an inventory or account of an understanding of the past (not necessarily of cinema) that is considered relevant to the present. Second, it helps to bring my germane genealogy back to the present like a Möbius strip to unfurl the terms and
conditions that the cinematic past imposes upon present production as its necessary and incontrovertible precedent.

*OUATIM* starts with a shot of the sparkling golden waters bordering present day Bombay.\(^{210}\) Subsequent shots show the wreck of a car being hauled out by a crane from the water symbolically mirroring the larger narrative action of dredging up the past. The narrative that follows is the first person account of Police Officer Agnes Wilson who explains to his superior officer why he had attempted to kill himself by driving his car into the water. Wilson recounts an epic succession of events leading up to the ’93 Bombay blasts as he sees them, and explains why he himself feels responsible for them. As Officer Agnes Wilson’s confessional reminiscences take on the mantle of the film’s unmoored narratorial voice, the events being narrated in fact push the temporal frame of this aetiological myth further back into history, chronicling Mirza’s ascent, from being a labourer at the dock, graduating from petty to big time smuggler, and finally Mirza’s role in putting an end to gang wars by dividing up Bombay between rival dons Pathan, Vishnu, Vardhan and Varghese, according to police *chowkis*: or in other words *exactly* along the official administrative grid of the city. Ironically, Officer Wilson laments the eventual usurpation of Mirza’s more communitarian, humanitarian, in fact ethical world of organized crime by another kind of criminality represented by a younger aspiring don called Shoaib Khan (again reportedly based on the figure of Dawood Ibrahim) whom Wilson himself had instigated to infiltrate Mirza’s gang.\(^{211}\) Mirza is shot dead by Shoaib in the film, whereas Mastan in real life had died of a cardiac arrest in 1994 after forming the Dalit Muslim Surakhsha Mahasangh with Dalit leader Jogendra Kawade. This alteration is clearly necessitated by the fact that a paradigm shift, especially in a crime melodrama, is neither a dinner party nor a gradual transition of one order into another; it has to be necessarily represented by the violent and literal usurpation of the former by the latter regime.

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\(^{210}\) Mukul Anand’s *Agneepath* was another film that started with a shot tracking back from light sparkling off the water along the Bombay coastline.

\(^{211}\) Haji Mastan (born Mastan Haider Mirza) made millions through smuggling gold, silver and electronic goods and was once arrested and detained under the Conservation of Foreign Exchange and Prevention of Smuggling Activities (COFEPOSA) Act during the Emergency.
The second film, *City of Gold-Mumbai 1982: Ek ankahee Kahani* (Mahesh Manjrekar, 2010) intends to be and is shot in the manner of a social realist document providing an insight into the lives of the laid off mill-workers following the strikes of 1982 in Bombay. Located in the lower class residential areas of Lalbagh Parel, the film follows the travails of one family and the extended neighbourhood to trace the vortex of destitution and crime generated by the strikes that took away the livelihood of an entire generation of mill labourers.

*City of Gold* seeks to represent through its circumscribed world the era of the collapse of textile industry in Bombay which had gathered momentum during the World War II era. By the early ’80s however, the mill industry, facing competition from power looms was undergoing rapid de-industrialization in spite of the government’s interventions through the National Textile Corporation to take over the management of a large sector of the ‘sick’ industry. The protracted workers’ strike of 1982–83 lasting over almost twenty months in which over 250,000 labourers abstained from work constitutes the narrative lynchpin of the film. It was in actuality a period marked by labour upsurge under the leadership of the aggressive and controversial leadership of Datta Samant characterised by “long drawn out struggles militantly carried out,” “direct, swift and uncompromising confrontation” and palpable and immediate demands. Samant had risen to prominence in the post emergency period with the dispersal of the communist trade union movement which hadn’t fully recovered from the murder of its leader Krishna Desai in 1970 and the subsequent phase of attacks from the Shiv Sena, and its own inability to adapt itself, unencumbered by any ideological underpinning, to the shop-floor negotiations that was the hallmark of the late ’70s and early ’80s. It was an era marked by “general distrust of capitalists,” “disgust […] towards the legal system,” and “distrust […]in the financial statements of companies.” It represented a “flouting of bourgeois respectability and

212 Sandip Pendse, ‘The Datta Samant Phenomenon: II’ p. 747. Dipankar Bhattacharya in ‘Datta Samant— A Tribute’ says “At a time when, riding on the crest of the original sympathy wave, Rajiv Gandhi romped home with the biggest ever majority ever enjoyed by the Congress; when a party like BJP finished with a pathetic tally of two parliamentary seats; and CPI(M) stalwarts fell like ninepins in the bastion of West Bengal, Samant emerged tall and triumphant, entering Parliament on an independent anti-Congress ticket on the strength of the proud support of the Mumbai working class.” Available at http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_1997/february/homage.htm
responsibility” and a militant assertion of class difference in instances of confrontation in contrast to the earlier phase of legalism, class collaboration and pro-management stance of labour unions under the Congress controlled INTUC.\textsuperscript{213}

*City of Gold* captures in part the particularities of trade unionism of this period, like the urgency of shop floor agitations, without making any explicit references to the political affiliations of the workers’ strikes. Dr Sawant, the figurehead of the labour unrest in the film, is presumably based on the historical figure of Datta Samant, and serves only as a peripheral reference point to the narrative that focuses on not only a family but an entire neighbourhood descending into bare life. Nor is there much attempt to generalize class conflict in *City of Gold*. The factory in the film, Khetaan Mills, is run by the owner’s avaricious son in law, Mahendra Seth. Several departments have already been shut down. The labourers’ salaries have been in arrear for six months. Those forced to retire, like Anna Dhuri, the head of the family at the centre of the film’s narrative, are still to be paid their gratuities. It is in this context that local leaders Arvind Rane and Govind Rahate confront the management under the guidance of Dr. Sawant. Mahendra Seth, however, wants to partake of the benefits of ‘globalization’ at par with ‘multinationals.’ He bribes the minister of industry in cash and kind to facilitate the extraction of a No Objection Certificate from the labourers for the sale of the land where he wants to build a shopping mall with restaurants and multiplexes and three thirty-storeyed towers for residences and corporate offices. However the stark difference between the spaces of the *chawl* or the factory and Mahendra’s posh bungalow flanked by a massive swimming pool only serves to represent the political and economic crisis of the period as being motivated by the diabolic machinations of one man.

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid.—Despite the ‘failure’ of the great strike of 1982–83 Samant was elected to the Lok Sabha on an Anti-congress ticket in 1984 and maintained an oppositional stand to both the Shiv Sena and the BJP. He was gunned down by four unidentified assailants outside his residence on 16th January 1997. For a detailed critical account of the circumstances and political transformations under which Datta Samant rose to prominence see Sandip Pendse ‘The Datta Samant Phenomenon’ parts I and II (1981).
The family at the centre of the film, residents of a chawl named Laxmi Cottage in Parel, is headed by Anna Dhuri, a retired labourer from Khetaan mills. His wife Laxmi Dhuri and their three sons and a daughter: Baba—the aspiring playwright, Mohan—a bank clerk, Naru—a hot headed unemployed young man who will soon be inducted into crime, and Manju—part time helper at a local beauty parlour constitute the film’s dramatis personæ as much as the other residents of the chawl whose lives are enmeshed in the close contours of its cramped spaces. Roadside shanties, shared corridors and courtyards, staircases, the paved street outside the tenement house, the interiors of the chawl, are all captured in a constantly mobile handheld camera that is also used to emphasize dramatic movement throughout the film along with fish-eye distortions and canted frames that emphasize and prompt discomfort at a world gone askew.

City of Gold uses, like OUATIM, a point of view informed by, but not adhering to, the gangland visual and narrative rhetoric in its lens focused upon the point of origin of crime and the disenfranchisement of the masses now deliberately taken into cognizance. It does bring to the fore the socio-economic factors which, solely by virtue of this backward perspective, are rendered with exceptional clarity as transformations pushing towards the experiential realm of the city of ruins. But, unlike OUATIM, City of Gold’s dissociation from the density of the urban that had been established by the gangland films takes another approach altogether. It relies on producing shock and pathos facilitated and emphasized by camerawork and editing at the breakdown of social norms within the familial and the familiar. Its apparent social realist imperative grounded in the spoken narrative of a left leaning playwright (Baba, or Giri Dhuri) allows neither the valorization of the life of the gangster at close proximity nor the retrenchment of the banality of the everyday within a recuperative cinematic rhetoric.

The film starts abruptly with a digitized skyline of Mumbai, on which a graph traces real estate prices,\(^{214}\) and which morphs into the title of the film that seeks to unravel the heinous truth behind its making. A brief interlude transports us to

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\(^{214}\) “Mahalaxmi—Rs 15,000 per square feet, Girgaon—Rs 578,000, Marine Line—Rs 20,978, Juhu—Rs 22,050, Vile Parle—Rs 19,000, Mahim—Rs 33,700, Parel—Rs 70,050,” etc.
“Mumbai many years ago, Hanuman Theatre (Parel)” where a Marathi nautch girl performs to an assembled crowd of men in vests and white Gandhi caps. It is a glance into a robust working class life that existed before the strike. Following this segment, the film lands us into present day Bombay, smog covered skyscrapers dominating its skyline. The camera pans up the side of a high-rise under construction and settles into a real estate office where a young couple seeks an apartment. Explaining why he specifically desires an apartment in Lower Parel rather than the relatively upper class Shivaji Park, Giri Dhuri recounts his story. The introductory shots move into the chawl, and inside the Dhuri family’s single room abode through a shared open corridor choking with tin drums, boxes and clothes-lines. Successive swish pans follow Manju with a wet towel around her head at a mirror, move onto a curtained off enclosure with a transistor radio on the shelf blaring out the commentary to an India-Pakistan test match, Mohan taking a bath below it, a cluttered pile of pots, pans and sundry household objects beyond the makeshift bathroom, and Laxmi, or Aayee cooking over a kitchen ledge far left. Manju waters a plant outside and surreptitiously flirts with Jignesh, who keeps a grocery shop across the street from the chawl. The camera follows the density of action spilling from one space into the other to deliberately bring into focus how sanctified sanctuaries of private space and individual relationships become untenable in this lower class milieu. The only jarring note in this depiction of the everyday is sounded by Baba who constantly complaints about the noise and the petty aspirations of his family. It is important to note here that the account of the irreversible descent of the chawl and its inhabitants into poverty, destitution and crime accompanied by the gradual bankruptcy of any notion of normalcy or humanity is framed from his already distantiated point of view. The limited aspirations of the family members bring nothing but misfortune. Manju is impregnated by Jignesh and has an abortion. Mohan enticed by the prospect of profit to be made in betting on fixed cricket matches embezzles money from his bank and is arrested. Baba arranges for Mohan’s bail and the reimbursement of the stolen amount to the bank by selling a kidney. However, the cycle of compromises are soon given the shape of a pervasive pathology slowly engulfing the residents of the chawl. The first rupture follows the negotiations with the minister in which the labourers under false promises from the management give
permission for the sale of land and await the opening of closed down units outside the factory gates. The deception is revealed when the factory building blows up behind the assembled labourers in a series of explosions. The explosions, with billowing smoke and flying debris, are caught in slow motion and superimposed on the stricken faces of the labourers. The frame finally settles on the face of one of Anna’s neighbours who clasps his hands to his head, his face crumpled, shaking uncontrollably. Pathologization in this instance is equated with dehumanization following extreme despair; the signs and symptoms of the malady however will be repeated in the remainder of the film with an increasing frequency. The following morning the residents find his corpse, and those of his wife and daughter, hanging by nooses from the rafters. The narrative from this juncture is taken over by two intertwined voiceovers. The dead woman’s letter to her sister constitutes one strand that laments the poverty and destitution that had befallen them and is accompanied by black and white stills of close-ups of the dust covered stilled machines of the factory and those of its despondent labourers. The other voiceover, presumably Baba’s, continues through the remainder of the film taking us through the turn of events. This briefest of oral history-esque personal testimony of the former perhaps presents a more poignant, sympathetic and complex picture of the period than Baba’s objective account with its forced and reductive establishment of cause-effect relations between the strikes and the consequent rise of the underworld can muster.

While the adults resort to selling their utensils, stoves and the scant jewellery that they own, and the women sell their bodies, the vortex of intense pathologization absorbs the children of the chawl in successive episodes. In the first, hungry children squatting on a dirt mound by the roadside get up to pick out morsels of food which someone has thrown away, and dust them off. In the second, a group of teenagers accost a lone drunken man and ask him for money. Refused, they descend upon him in a pack, hitting, kicking and biting him in hysterical exultation and strip off his wallet, rings, watch and shoes. In the third, Naru, by this time working for the underworld, interrogates a man tied to a chair to recover money the hostage owes to the local bhai. The same teenagers sit drinking from a bottle around them. They keep breaking into murderous fits and keep aggressing upon the man being interrogated. Hell descends when Naru leaves to meet his
lover. In cross cuts edited to the tempo of the increasing frenzy of the drunken boys, shots of Naru and his lover at their rendezvous alternate with shots of the hostage being mauled, hit, bitten and finally shot by the boys in an insane exhilaration while one of them shakes and shivers in the throes of this thirst for violence egging the others on.

*City of Gold* does occasionally venture into shots of the city outside the circumscribed space of the *chawl* and its paved by-lane, the gate of the factory and the posh Khetaan bungalow with its swimming pool. In a Ganapathy procession amidst a chaotic deluge of an anonymous crowd, Naru coaches a neophyte Ganpat (nicknamed Speedbreaker because of his speech impaired stutter) to use a gun. The frames spin, crosscutting to the floodlit procession in the rain. An unsteady handheld camera captures Naru committing his first murder in the midst of the procession, with the editing dramatizing the act in a series of delirious dissolves which capture the falling body in slow motion. The film captures by default the simultaneity of the communitarian (in the sense of a chauvinistic Hindutva inculcated by the Shiv Sena in this period) and the making of a pervasive culture of violence without necessarily illuminating upon any interconnectedness of the two.

It is perhaps pertinent to speculate that *City of Gold* desires to replicate the social realist rhetoric of an earlier era in closely following and explicating the predicaments of its subjects. But its options are foreclosed by the prominence of the gangland films on the one hand which have already established their milieu as what Madhava Prasad would call “some kind of absolute of social reality.” The possible axis of representation available to *City of Gold* in eschewing the recuperation of banality of the former then lies in a partial adaptation of our first framework, and veers close to Bhandarkar’s use of denominating space by its stark difference from the middle class which is here depicted in the degeneration of multiple protagonists. It is because of this obfuscation of the specificities of the

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Prasad, talking about the counter-trend of gangland films within the popular, wonders if it is “as if this sector is trying to make up for the absence of social grounding by going down, as if the underbelly of the present social order is some kind of absolute of social reality.” in ‘The cinema of Imitation’ p. 42
moment of crisis that the film depicts, that Baba can chide Manju’s husband ex-
union-leader Arvind Rane for not having perceived the inevitable redundancy of
his project in the face of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The moment of
labour unrest becomes a generalized treatise on the failure of the Left movement.
The film avoids engagement with the particular political energies attendant upon
this moment of economic reorganization. At the end of the film Baba, now a
successful and affluent playwright, returns to the chawl with his girlfriend (who
exclaims “what a fascinating chawl,” “so full of life”) and observes the exact same
state of things now put in an affectionately comic light—Arvind Rane still talks of
an imminent court order that would clear the workers’ dues and restore their jobs;
the petty bickerings, the incongruous family unit of their neighbor Mama, his wife
Mami and their son sired by Mohan, Jignesh from the shop flirting with another
young girl at a balcony of the chawl—everything remains the same. The film
shares on equal footing Baba’s distantiation from their ‘phatichar’ (decrepit,
disreputable) lives.

Both City of Gold and Once Upon a time in Mumbai in their own ways posit this
descent into crime as an inevitable pathological condition. Pathologization, in the
sense of an incessant haunting of the past that frustrates one’s desires for the
future, was in fact one of the ways in which a psychological interiority could be
provided for the underprivileged in film after film. As Madhava Prasad points out,
it presented “a crucial interiority without which there would be nothing but a
statistical mass of slum dwellers […] figuring as numbers in some economist’s
calculations […] as if when the memory of the original home has faded, the body
became emptied of subjectivity. 216 The process of desubjectivization in Prasad’s
reading follows the bodily extrication of its urban populace from the
communitarian village, and the gradual evaporation of all memories of this past. It
was also thus a narrative ploy devised to address the limits of representation faced
by the films of the ’70s onwards to justify the renegade drives of the criminally
inclined in any other way. With Satya (the protagonist in the eponymous film) of
course, this function of memory is deliberately foreclosed, though Prasad argues

216 Prasad ‘Realism and Fantasy’ p. 90
that it is replaced by his neurotic desire for an unattainable life of normalcy. However, one may argue that the nature of the pathologies are not of the same order, not merely by virtue of their orientation towards different temporalities—of a past irretrievably lost in one case and a possible future that is permanently out of reach in the other—but differ more significantly in how they aid to interpret the present time, and apprehend its banal flow in terms of permissible narratives. If we may recall, Ranjani Mazumdar had spoken about the city of ruins in terms of an excess of banality, a bursting at the seams of the experiential realm that was manifested in films like *Parinda* or *Satya*. Mazumdar herself borrows the notion of “banality as time off its hinges—no longer passing through the present in a neat linear succession that places the past behind and the future always out in front” from Seigworth’s essay ‘Banality for Cultural Studies’\(^\text{217}\) to theorize the sense of disconnect that permeated the texture of life post-strike, the “spatial disenchantment” and the temporal disorientation in a state of political and economic bare life that descended on the populace. “[R]andom events shape the identity of a particular section of urban crowd,” and “different kinds of performative drives are unleashed” “when the banality of everyday life reaches a psychological breaking point.”\(^\text{218}\) It does seem at first glance that this reading might be inclined towards the fallacy of a “hagiographic everydayness” that Seigworth, following de Certeau, warns against, that is inherent in the act of picking the splendid out of the banal as liberating. Let me elaborate my point. The banal is such precisely by virtue of the fact that it denies psychology, let alone any kind of psychological breaking point, generating an excess: in the sense that excess, like an expletive is an explosion of violent speech, is by its very etymology sequentially posited after accumulation to the point of irruption. Banality as such offers “[n]o reversibility or recapture of the escape, no redemption in some divinely scripted narrative for a recuperable event-structure of the everyday.”\(^\text{219}\) I should be equally wary myself of putting forth a culmination of something akin to the banal in the moment of *temp morte* which I argue clears space for the gangland film. Rather I would contend that it is precisely in the

nature of this hagiography of the banal minutae carefully picked out that the subsequent gangland films fashioned themselves after, to attribute a sense of epic grandeur to this banality. The banality that by definition does not grant access to excess valorized in retrospect, and in fact does not allow a time outside of its relentless flow, is thus painstakingly parenthesised, and rehabilitated in the gangland genre.

*Once upon a time in Mumbai*, acknowledges *Deewar* as the seminal text that established the necessity of this alternative network of power organized around the figure of the underclass gangster hero: First, by looking at the cinema of the period, from which it selectively appropriates traits; these involve the characterization of the hero and the nature of popular investiture in him; and second, by looking at the historical period refracted through the lens of cinematic memory. Thus the nature and necessity of the alternative network of power represented by the hero, distinct from and opposed to state power, is established as incontrovertibly necessary and beneficial for a large section of the urban populace neglected by the state. The opposition thus is remapped as that between two Manichean poles within this alternative frame itself, the good gangster and the bad gangster. The police as the representatives of the state endorse the former. *City of gold* on the other hand dissociates itself from this hagiographic rendering of the gangster. In the absence of the frame that would rehabilitate local politics, everyday negotiations and modes of life in their relationship to this alternative fulcrum of power represented by the gangster hero, the depiction of everyday life becomes increasingly pathologized. Concerns that would require the mediation of the hero for their redressal are left unaddressed. Pushed to the extreme they are manifested in forms of intense pathologization. The rise of gangland Bombay is seen as one of the many outcomes of this pathologization.

**VI Gangland Bombay: An Afterlife**

To reiterate our former points: *Satya* in its inception associated the life of the disenfranchised community in the city with another order of existence and locus of political power parallel to that of the state. Its time was the truncated and dense present. The banal *minutae* of the everyday life of underclass Bombay had been
documented in a way that would inaugurate and consolidate an entire regime of representation in subsequent gangland films.

Two sets of problematics however emerge from this conclusion. One: what sustained this communitarian perception of the gang world that is fundamental to our second framework? And two: how would it negotiate the opposed framework that accorded a primacy to the middle class protagonist?

If we may return to the historian’s reading of the political lay of the land as it is captured in the Hindi popular of the 1970s:

Amitabh Bachchan’s ‘angry young man’ helped me make sense of Bal Thackeray in the 1960s, although, as I say in the book, it was the Sena chief who carved out the role that Bachchan made famous on the screen.220

So says Gyan Prakash of the cinematic idiom that informs, shapes and gives direction to his account of the various stages through which Mumbai came into being. But one may ask, what is it that allows for this series of slippages between the categories of popular politics and ‘criminality’? Of violence and visibility? Of the kind of investiture in a figure that can neither be reduced to nor sufficiently or adequately explained by the category of an incipient political society seeking representation? If the community of Deewar was but a catechistic category for all forms of resistance to the domineering reach of the state and the law as its instrument, there seems to be another mode of nomination within popular Bombay cinema that falls into place roughly about the time that Satya was made. The severance of memory and by extension of another space of pastoral belonging that Satya brought into existence, where the characters are no longer qualified with or calibrated by “the “memory of a place left behind [that] served in some mysterious fashion to give depth to a character,”221 testifies to the coming together of a communitarian investiture in the deviant hero of mainstream Bombay cinema that owes its origin to something else altogether.

220 Amitava Kumar reviewing Gyan Prakash’s Mumbai Fables quotes his interview with the author in ‘How to write like a Historian’ in Bookslut, February 2011.
221 Madhava Prasad, ‘Realism and Fantasy in Representations of Metropolitan Life in Bombay Cinema,’ p. 90
Thomas Blom Hansen, in a short essay 222 that traces the specific colonial history of the estrangement of the law and the decline of the sovereignty of the state, retroactively traces three kinds of competing repertoires of authority organized respectively around the *de facto* practices of sovereignty: first, in the name of the law, second, for the community, and third, in the figure of the local big man. Though all of these variants are usually associated with the imperfect implementation of an electoral democratic norm at various periods following the independence of India, Hansen’s study locates their presence and persistence in the political configurations that were put into place even as these norms were being instituted by the colonial government. The argument pushes it a bit further than Sudipta Kaviraj’s concept of local, vernacular translations of the constitution. Hansen’s study looks at the prevalent logics behind the ‘apparent paradox’ behind our contemporary “widespread endorsement of legality and a proliferation of legal arguments in India’s public culture” on the one hand and on the other— “an equally widespread endorsement of retribution and killings during communal riots […] and even more widespread practices of private revenge and violence when settling private and family conflicts.” 223 The theoretical foundation of Hansen’s argument lies not only in the co-constitution of the outside and inside of state sovereignty as in Agamben’s ‘state of exception’ but also points to a certain specificity of “the trajectory of colonial and postcolonial state formations in South Asia” where there is the marked existence of “multiple sovereignties as provisional and always contested” and where the state necessarily remains “as an unfinished and continuous project of control and subordination of the many forms of sovereignty beyond its own legal discourse and repressive capacity.” 224 While I would keep from speculating upon the political manifestations and implications of these competing networks of power that “seek to organize

223 Ibid. p. 110
224 Ibid. p.113—Thus though it is indeed possible, following Agamben’s argument in *State of Exception*, (1942, tr. 2005), to turn the lens upon the nature of sovereignties in the West, it is more pertinent for my present project to limit myself to the specific historical instance of our own sovereignty. And although Hansen’s claim might also translate as some kind of an ontological condition native to South Asian instances of colonialism and their subsequent dissipation, I will suspend that argument for the space of this dissertation and try to see its immediate implications in the congealing of urban political configurations in the city of Bombay.
violence, retributions and entitlements,”\textsuperscript{225} I will however take Hansen’s insights into the logic of structuring of these networks in tandem with and in contradistinction to the state authority in looking into some uncannily similar ensembles of power that motivate political mobilization and retribution in the narrative world of mainstream Bombay cinema. Under colonial rule, the community, as \textit{samaj}, \textit{jati} or \textit{quam}, and alongside language or family, had been held in nationalist imagination as the inside (following Partha Chatterjee’s thesis) of the nation. However, the schism between the “sovereignty of the nation” and its “constituent communities as separate from and independent of the state”\textsuperscript{226} became more pronounced, following Hansen’s argument, with decolonization. The state, from being an alien entity, came to occupy a central position in the national imagination. While the era of Nehruvian reformism had sought to regulate and govern intimate matters, Hansen contends, [t]he everyday administration in localities, political mobilization, the implementation of laws and government decrees, as well as court proceedings and policing, remained firmly mediated, if not controlled, by local notables and hierarchies of big men who exercised the de facto sovereignty in most everyday matters.\textsuperscript{227} This understanding provides a point of access into alternative conceptions of sovereignty premised on economies of retribution\textsuperscript{228} in two films that explicitly address these alternative frameworks of power situated within the very heart of the modern urban.

“When the system fails… A power will rise”

—Introductory frame of \textit{Sarkar} (2005, Ram Gopal Varma)

In a lengthy elaboration in the same vein Ram Gopal Varma’s précis of the film appears in print on the back of the officially released DVD that can offer several entry points into its reading.

Like countless directors all over the world, some of whom may admit to the fact and some who may not—I have been deeply influenced by

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid. p. 110
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid. p. 122
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{228} Putting a rather different spin on the line “Everything is personal” from \textit{The Godfather}. 
Francis Ford Coppola’s unforgettable movie ‘The Godfather’, both in technical style and story content.

Yet at the same time, I would clarify firmly that ‘SARKAR’ is not an imitation or a clone. Its story and screenplay have been located in an Indian milieu and particularly so in the context of Mumbai’s power superstructure.

Contrary to media speculation, the title character is not an underworld don, rather he is a man who has rewritten the law. He has risen with time and circumstance to wield unchecked and autocratic authority over the people living in a so-called democratic form of governance. By nature, he possesses the ability, the charisma, the intelligence and the Machiavellian cunning to control the working of the city, in all its various aspects. He even dispenses justice when the common man cannot obtain it from the law keepers—the government, the police and the judiciary. [All italics are mine]

Notwithstanding the faithfulness to Mario Puzo’s original novel or Coppola’s trilogy, Sarkar’s importance lies in finding apt repositories for equivalences in the present Indian context. It is the process of this translation that becomes relevant to our case. It is curious that Sarkar eschews the depiction of underworld connections and feudal overlords while eking out a position of power for its eponymous patriarch.

Sarkar in Hindi is of course the word for government as well as a vocative for one’s superior, employer, etc. connoting a sense of servitude to the person or entity holding the title. The currencies between the two are however not of any concern to us. Neither is the fact that the film is a fairly faithful rendering of the original novel by Mario Puzo as far as its plot outline is concerned, albeit adapted to an Indian context. What is however crucial is that the film in its attempt to find equivalences with the Italian Mob depicts its central character Subhash Nagre as bearing noticeable resemblances with Bal Thackeray (not least in the naming) if not with the actual mode of operation of the Shiv Sena.

Unlike Vijay of Deewar or Agneepath (1994) Nagre no longer needs to negotiate his alienation from the respectable middle class. The process of normalization is greatly facilitated by constructing the self-contained domesticity of the Nagre
household (in deference to the close confines of the Italian patriarchal family of *The Godfather*). The gated interiors of *Sarkar* protected by a battery of armed thugs pose a very different picture to the gated middle class interiors of Varma’s horror films. It is never susceptible to the same kind of threats from the outside (or to put it less euphemistically, the lower classes) precisely because its legitimacy as the seat of power derives from the endorsement of the very segment that had threatened to infiltrate the sacrosanct space of the affluent interiors of the former. Nagre is explicitly posited as the custodian of the poor, the slum-dwellers, as well as the powerless middle classes denied justice by the bureaucratic machinery of the state always already allied with the corrupt and the affluent (corrupt and affluent are incidentally represented as being synonymous in both *Sarkar* and its sequel *Sarkar Raj*). It is perhaps also relevant to point out here, *pace* Hansen, that in Bombay post the violent riots of 1992-93 it was in fact the (Hindu) middle classes faced by the anxiety of retaliation from the anonymous Muslim segments of the populace that were inducted into this rhetoric of violence and pre-emptive retributive killings that propel the logic of equilibrium in the gangland films. But it is again by no means a secret hiding under the cosmopolitan surface of Bombay, its hidden underbelly that rarely ever crawls out of the woodworks and is confined to invisibility outside of police records, encounters, and internal bloodshed. Subhash Nagre dominates the symbolic landscape of Bombay’s everyday politics in stark visibility of the televisual and print media. News reports string together every single turn of event in *Sarkar* and closely monitor the rise and fall of public opinion in his favour. It is also the news reports on television that string together disparate spaces of residence and business in underclass Bombay (homes, roadside tea shacks, shops) centred by the gravitational pull of the unofficial patriarch.

“*Sarkar ek soch hai*” (*Sarkar* is but a notion, a principle)—the repeated reiteration that occurs within the film comes uncannily close to capturing the heart of what is at stake here: it is precisely this concept of this inviolable and unimpeachable sovereignty, the power to disburse judgement, the capacity to execute, and the overarching faith in its infallibility that sustains the notion of the ‘Big Man’ in Hansen—not so much as parallel governance but as the *only* possible arbiter of justice, and as mediator between the populace and the apathetic and corrupt state.
machinery. Sarkar the concept in *Sarkar* the film is reified beyond all contextual embedding revealing the strength of its conviction in this concept. In a climactic sequence Nagre’s son Shankar confronts Madan Rathore, the corrupt Chief Minister of Maharashtra who has machinated Subhash Nagre’s assassination in a coup to appropriate power over Mumbai. Shankar tells Rathore that his closest ally Virendra Swami has been turned and has divulged to the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) all his “underworld connections, black money and foreign bank accounts.” This leads us to a curious dilemma. Rathore had been Sarkar’s protégé in the government, backed by Sarkar’s connections. For all practical purposes Sarkar is the primary ‘underworld connection’ that Rathore had been relying on. Within the enclosed universe of contesting power blocs in the film Sarkar is the parallel government deemed synonymous with Bombay, the sole dynamo behind the smooth running of its everyday politics, economics and is the last resort of justice. Sarkar is also precisely the entity who had been described by the Gandhian opposition (represented by the character of Motilal Khurana in the film) as someone who has been harbouring thugs and running a regime of intimidation, violence and extortion under the guise of helping the poor. Sarkar, within the narrative economy of the film, is neatly absolved from these allegations. The question thus is not the relevance of a Godfather like figure but the terms on which this figure is, and perhaps can be, translated.

*Sarkar Raj* (2008, Ramgopal Varma) the sequel, in contrast, promises to be an “intense political drama,” “essentially a study of power”, which “explores the politics of development” and “takes a fresh look at the tradition versus modernity debate.” Eventually though, “evil forces mightier than ever gang up together to bring down the regime of Sarkar.” By *Sarkar Raj*, the red gash of vermillion on Nagre’s forehead that had been one of the semblances between Subhash Nagre and his real life referrent Bal Thackeray has been iconicized into the logo for the title card of the film. The *soch* or the very concept of Sarkar has become an

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229 *Sarkar Raj* does not strictly belong in Varma’s Gangster trilogy, as evident in his statement from the cover of the DVD of *Sarkar*—“Finally, I would like to state that ‘SATYA and ‘COMPANY’ were just preparatory blue prints for the film ‘SARKAR’. With this film, I hope that my trilogy on crime and punishment; within the reality of our country, our city, and our neighbourhood has come to a full circle.”

230 Summary of the film that appears on the cover of the officially released DVD.

231 Ibid.
unquestionable repository of benevolent parallel governance. *Sarkar,* the individual as well as the concept, is thus posited as being synonymous with Mumbai, the cosmopolitan heart of Maharashtra and perhaps even the nation in a much larger sense here. The oppositions consequently are charted out between the Bombay based impetus for development versus its hinterland/s. Metonymically, the four villages in nearby Thakerwadi and the 40,000 people about to be displaced to make room for a power plant—proposed by a foreign company headed by a Non Resident Indian, Mike Rajan—present the recalcitrant nation up in arms against development. The curious twist in the representational economy of the film is not in the presence of an elderly patriarch Rao Sahib, a rural Gandhian politician, and Nagre’s original mentor, who represents the affective gravitational pull of the feudal synonymous with tradition but in the invocation of his grandson Somji, leader of a peasants’ co-operative who would vociferously oppose the power plant project. The delineation of the evil forces in *Sarkar Raj* concatenates on the one hand a nexus between NRI investment capital working in tandem with corrupt political networks and equally corrupt indigenous business conglomerates. On the other the opposition is visually mapped out between the cavalcade led by Shankar and Anita (Mike Rajan’s daughter who defies her father’s directives and forms an alliance with Shankar) campaigning for the power-plant project in the villages of Thakerwadi armed with an assemblage of corporate props of graphs and charts with which they address assembled crowds at one end, and the violent mobilization of turbanned peasants by Somji on the other accompanied by their tell-tale red flags and banners. The warring parties are clearly marked by their saffron and red affiliations. The unmistakable association of Somji’s agitations with Left movements against enforced development, work to delegitimize the latter by the end of the film when the apparent endorsement of the power plant project by Rao Sahib is revealed as a heinous conspiracy hatched by him to murder Shankar, appropriate Nagre’s mantle and nominate his grandson Somji at the helm of electoral politics in Maharashtra. Following this revelation, Nagre has Somji killed in retaliation to Shankar’s murder. The mantle of Sarkar is inherited by Anita, who had become Shankar’s fiancée, and now, clad in a business suit, holds meetings in a room adjacent to Nagre’s chamber. The frame freezes over her face and dissolves into a forked saffron banner bearing a sun logo to the rising
crescendo of the ‘Govinda Govinda’ chant on the soundtrack that has so far accompanied the Nagre family. *Sarkar Raj* thus smoothly invests its alternative power enclave with the potential for co-optation into the framework of liberalized economy, the dreamt of future of our first framework, while bypassing the corollary of liberal democratic politics.