Chapter 5: The Pressing Question of Disabilities

I

In the previous three chapters, the middle class as a category, as it appears in Bombay cinema of this period, is conceptualized in terms of its perceived difference from others, which have also been painstakingly constructed as part and parcel of the process of its own constitution. The central focus of the last chapter is on the possible interfaces between liberal politics and liberal economics. The chapter on violence touches upon the rehabilitation of the mundane and the banal within permissible narratives for the new middle class without acceding to alternative configurations of power. The chapter on middle class habitations is focused on the contradictions and discrepancies within the new middle class, the difficulty of smoothly transforming one understanding of middle class into another, and the sheer impossibility of sustaining its boundaries.

In this chapter I look at the other as something implicit in the very idea of the new Indian middle class and bring the focus squarely back on forging selves and exorcising the other (other spaces, other languages) within the self. The very tenuous nature of this new subject of cinema, the central protagonist and his/her/their new found socio-economic co-ordinates have in fact come unravelled in a series of films in the last decade. This undoing can become the explicit subject matter of new narratives—a recent generation of directors have addressed this theme of descent, of the protagonist becoming déclassé, in films like Hazaaron Khwaishen Aisi (Sudhir Mishra, 2003), Ek Chaalis ka Last Local (Sanjay Khanduri, 2007), No smoking (Anurag Kashyap, 2007), Oye Lucky, Lucky Oye! (Dibakar Banerjee, 2008), Sankat City (Pankaj Advani, 2009), Gulaal and Dev-D (both by Anurag Kashyap, 2009).\(^\text{300}\) It is a tendency that I argue could be squarely located within a larger problem of sustaining as the new subject of cinema an urban cosmopolitan subject that is itself in a process of perpetual becoming.

\(^\text{300}\) I thank Subhajit Chatterjee for illuminating upon these “narratives of fall or decadence” that trace “the middle class citizen’s incidental journey down a spiral staircase to an absurdist oblivion” in a paper presented at the National Seminar at the Department of Film Studies, 2009. Chatterjee himself reads this tendency as indicative of a deliberate disassociation on the part of filmmakers from the structure of melodrama as a frame or interpretation.
Let me elaborate my point a little by indicating the nature of contradictions that these films seem to be engaging with by looking closely at some of them. A. Singh in an article on Dibakar Banerjee’s *Oye Lucky, Lucky Oye!* and *Khosla ka Ghosla* (henceforth OLLO and KKG respectively) lauds Banerjee’s attention to detail in exposing “the classes within classes that exist inside what is typically referred to as the Great Indian middle class” and his “complete lack of interest in the yuppistan typically portrayed by Ranbir Kapoor in Yashraj or Karan Johar films, representing only 10 % of India.” At the most apparent level this reading is in direct continuity with Pavan Varma’s diatribe against the new middle class and perhaps could also tangentially be related to the amorphous target segment defined by its “consumerist ontology” that the advertising firms analysed by Mazzarella were seeking to tap into, as well as the palpable pressure of aspiration to sustain one’s identity that we could read into the statements of Butcher’s respondents. Critiques on a similar vein have made their way into the subject matter of films by this time, for example in Arindam Chaudhuri’s *Do Dooni Chaar* (2010) about a middle class school teacher buckling under the burden of material desires imposed upon him by a pervasive ethos of consumerism. Banerjee’s meticulous attention to mise-en-scene in *Oye Lucky, Lucky Oye!* is not unlike *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* which received accolades from reviewers on similar terms for its nuanced representation of ordinary middle class life. Singh however isolates KKG, for its ability to focus “on the timidity of [the] typical Indian middle class […] scared of the real estate agents, the police, the government, the real estate sharks and even our own kids.” Like *Rocket Singh,*

301 A. Singh, ‘Dibakar Banerjee and the rotten Indian middle class’
http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1827371,00.html, accessed on 31st January 2012
302 Ibid. Singh continues his diatribe in the same vein “The subject of Dibakar’s attention in OLLO is the bystander who watches yuppistan from the sidelines and belongs to the 50% in the middle. Remaining 30 % of Indians don’t count, not even among the bystanders. Dibakar is very cruel in exposing the complete hypocrisy and way of life of this bystander class […]The 50% class has been given a long shopping list by the top 10 %, the government and multinationals and their whole life they are busy filling up their small houses with crap from this list they don’t otherwise need.”
304 Singh, in his review ‘Dibakar Banerjee and the rotten Indian middle class’ describes Dibakar Banerjee as someone who walks “right into the by lanes of Delhi’s middle class life, places his tripod and zooms in through the attached walls of the multiple houses illegally constructed by violating all sorts of municipal laws and encroachment on the narrow gullies.”
305 Ibid.
KKG is also about the canny pragmatic manipulation of the terms of victimization of the middle class to their own advantage. In Singh’s reading, it is primarily about an underdog, a puny David triumphing over Goliath. It is to all practical purposes about legitimizing a rationale of exceptionalism which allows moral space for the wronged middle class protagonist to turn the tables with impunity. It would perhaps help to bring out the subtext of exceptionalism if we look at some debates that followed Anna Hazare’s call for the removal of corruption from the realm of Indian politics and bureaucracy. As pointed out by Partha Chatterjee, Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Arjun Appadurai respectively, Hazare’s popularity with the middle class was premised precisely on the perceived separation of the domain of politics and bureaucracy from the realities of everyday middle class transactions as much as it was on the utter disavowal of the fact that it was in fact the educated and salaried middle classes that populate the offices of bureaucracy and various levels of the government machinery. Taken in this sense, KKG, and also Rang De Basanti in retrospect, seem to share in a similar logic of enframing otherness and foregrounding the immediacy of exceptionalism in their resolutions.

For Anurag Kashyap, and a generation of filmmakers contemporary to Kashyap, the frame of reference derives from a practice of watching international avant-garde cinema in pirated DVD circuits among peers (overlapping with but still distinct from the official canon of world cinema that gradually congealed in an earlier cinephiliacal moment with the Cine Society generation). Filmmaking for Kashyap’s generation then, becomes a dynamic process of archiving and curating, which is analogous to the way an individual would meticulously accumulate films on DVD. It becomes rather like an inventory of one’s affinities where influences can co-exist with quotes, replications of images from one’s personal canon and such without necessarily creating contrary pulls within the text. When the text does pull at the seams with its excesses, however, (for instance, in Dev D when Dev walks into the factory owned by his family in Chandigarh for the first time—we see a vast expanse of its green tinged giant innards reminiscent of the

dystopic spaces in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis, 1927*), what is produced as a result is a dense viewerly text.\(^{307}\) Admittedly, in the series of interviews on *The Making of Dev-D*,\(^{308}\) Kashyap says that the films that constituted the mindset for both him and his cinematographer before they went on to devise the look and feel of the film were *Paris, Texas* (1994) by Wim Wenders, Wong Kar Wai’s films and *Om-Dar-Ba-Dar* (1988) by Kamal Swaroop which inspired the song ‘Emosonal Atyachar’ (performed by a loud and gauche brass band led by two Elvis impersonators in cheap rhinestone embellished white costumes). If recent work on Indian cinema hinges on a certain ‘reading competence’ through which what we see on the screen is to be deciphered, the pleasure for Kashyap’s audience lies in recognizing this other set of incessant references that infiltrate the body of the film. References abound not only in terms of film style or aesthetics but also in the preponderance of material clues, of objects strewn to populate the mise-en-scene: for instance, in the pulp paperbacks in *Dev-D* that Leni/Chanda reads in her boudoir. A closer look reveals one of them to be *The Girl with the Long Green Heart* by Lawrence Block, on whose novel *My Blueberry Nights* Wong Kar Wai’s 2007 film of the same name is based; another is *Contempt* by Alberto Moravia, the source novel for Godard’s *Le Mepris* (1963). It is in this context that Kashyap’s films *No Smoking, Dev-D* and *Gulaal* must be considered for their production of alternate spaces and constituencies in contradistinction to and often as departures from and antagonistic interventions into the conventional practices of filmmaking in Bombay cinema. In *No Smoking* thus, the journey into the underbelly of the city reflexively becomes a literal vertical descent into an othered space, the bowels of the metropolis under the slums of Dharavi.

In *Dev D* two kinds of spaces are radically juxtaposed. The first is Chandigarh, Dev’s hometown, which is represented deliberately as a Yash-Chopraesque pastoral vista. Kashyap’s engagement with Bollywood in this segment constantly urges the viewer to recall and excavate familiar images from other mainstream blockbusters, recalling their affect but also at the same time putting them to very different uses forcing viewers to interrogate their complicity with the construction. The shot of Dev’s plane superimposed in post-production to seem like it’s flying

\(^{307}\) If one can draw a cinematic parallel to Roland Barthes’ notion of the writerly text.

\(^{308}\) A special feature included on the officially released DVD of *Dev-D*. 
over the lush mustard fields of Chandigarh is at once a tongue in cheek reference to the mustard fields of Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (1995, Aditya Chopra’s directorial debut with his father Yash Chopra’s production house) and Rang De Basanti’s iconic shot of young revolutionaries leaping up into the air to touch a plane flying overhead. Another sequence with Paro and Dev in the fields in which a prostrate Paro clasps Dev’s denim-clad legs refers to the publicity poster for Maine Pyar Kiya, (1991, Sooraj R. Barjatya).

The second kind of space, in contrast, is Kashyap’s depiction of Delhi which he deliberately chose to shoot not with reference to its recognizable landmarks like the India Gate, Jama Masjid or Qutb Minar, but in focussing on Paharganj, represented as a nocturnal neon lit acid hell of sorts which, Kashyap says, most of his friends, upon viewing the film, mistook for some anonymous seedy back alley in Hong Kong.309

Kashyap’s third intervention is to take Dev-D an additional step beyond this vantage point from which the popular and its excesses are always already camp or kitsch by re-reading the popular canon as the historically unavoidable condition through which our viewing selves have been constituted. The most telling evidence of this is its evocation of another cult classic, Pyaasa (Guru Dutt, 1957), a film that doesn’t have to try too hard to qualify as an early interpretation of Devdas, which is referred to tangentially in Dev-D. Pyaasa presented a disenchanted view of the nation during the dispersal of the initial euphoria over the five year plans following India’s independence. Pyaasa’s depiction of the city as a heartless space beyond redemption (through progress and modernization), its likening of the nation to a brothel in one song and its final denouncement of it all altogether in another threw into relief a political subtext of disenchantment with the Nehruvian project. In Kashyap’s rendition, the train journey across the nation is irreverently reduced to a journey Dev, post disillusionment, and approaching annihilation traces across a faceless, bleached out mountain pass in the Himalayan foothills where he systematically gets rid of all his money, deliberately reduces himself to a pauper, and exposes himself to violence. A very short sequence at this

309 From Kashyap’s interview in The Making of Dev-D. The defamiliarization here is not premised on producing an India closer to reality, as an instantiation of which Kashyap’s Black Friday, 2004, was lauded by international critics for its objective documentation of everyday Bombay at the street level in crisis.
point uncannily and ironically echoes the starting frame of *Pyaasa*, of the hero lying on his back on the grass under a tree.

**II The Untimely Bildungsroman**

I select in the following sections two texts from a set of films that bear evidence of a more acute manifestation of this problem of sustaining a stable subject in the repeated occurrence of physical and psychical disabilities in their central protagonists. A range of debilitating ailments blights the protagonists in a series of films that have appeared in the last decade. In *Black* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2005) Michelle is blind and deaf from early infancy while her instructor Devraj succumbs to Alzheimer’s disease later in the course of the story; Sanjay in *Ghajini* (A.R. Murugasoss, 2008) has anterograde amnesia and is unable to retain any memory beyond 15 minutes; Ishaan an eight year old boy in *Taare Zameen Par*, (Aamir Khan, 2007) suffers from dyslexia, which is an inability to string together words and symbols in meaningful syntax; Auro, another 12 year old boy in *Paa* (R. Balakrishnan, 2009) is afflicted with Progeria, a genetic condition that causes premature aging; Rizwan Khan in *My Name is Khan* (Karan Johar, 2010) suffers from Asperger’s Syndrome, a form of autism characterized by an incapacity for normal social interaction and compulsive repetitive behavior—it is possible to cite yet more examples of such disorders that plague minor and major characters in a host of films. I intend in this chapter to look at this overwhelming visibility of disabilities as indicative of a crisis of legitimacy of the dominant film form as well as a problem inherent to the consolidation of a cosmopolitan subject posited as the subject of cinema in this period.

At the very onset it is useful to clarify that the representation of inarticulacies or debilities more often than not has functioned to displace larger concerns in cinema. One may cite the example of the maimed or absent father figure standing in for larger socio-political ruptures eluded from the narratives of films dealing with the Partition of India. Within fictive representations the trope of disability thus most always points to another frame of reference, an unresolved crisis elsewhere. Gulzar's *Koshish* (1972) for example, about a hearing and speech impaired couple Haricharan and Aarti, was an explicit commentary on the staggered process of extending local enfranchisements initiated in the era of
At one point in the film, Haricharan describing to his mother-in-law the Deaf and Dumb Institute where he has been schooled, produces a picture of Pandit Nehru from an envelope and gesticulates to her, comprehending his meaning, she says: "Panditji paise denge…accha, sarkar paise degi, sarkar, sarkari hai" (Panditji will pay for it… alright, it’s the government that pays for it). Haricharan’s condition becomes relatable to the concrete historical moment through a newspaper headline on the front page of *The Indian Express* that appears about twenty minutes into the film. It stays on screen for a short instant: ‘Hindi to replace English in two years: states to have their state languages in state offices.’ The state’s endeavour to extend benefits to all manners of its citizens is reflected in the film’s melodramatic resolution where Haricharan and Aarti intervene when their son refuses to marry a disabled girl, and bring about a happy ending.

Of course as a caveat it is also necessary to clarify that the nature of these disabilities is not of the same order as the inability to speak the truth (most often where a young couple is unable to speak of their romantic interest in each other to their respective families, for instance, in Sooraj Barjatya’s *Hum Aapke Hai Koun...!*, 1994) in a host of films that can be loosely grouped under the new feudal family romance. The problem there is of finding a suitable means to establish or produce the new couple within the circumscribed codes of an older patriarchy. Articulation there entails the mediation of this fact without any form of generational confrontation (circumvented through the use of *deux ex machina* in the form of Tuffy the dog in our example above) and is followed by the endorsement of the new couple by the old order.

The nature of disability that we isolate for our perusal in this chapter on the other hand seems to posit itself as an ontological bind inherent to the new cosmopolitan urban subject that is placed at the heart of the new socio-economic order. It is the integrity and cogency of this subject that I argue is at stake in the repeated invocation of the tropes of disability and inarticulacy in this set of films. It relates

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310 The Indian Constitution in 1950 decreed that Hindi would be India’s official language, but as a transitional measure allowed English to continue for fifteen years (till 1965). Nehru strove for compromise in his Official Languages Act of 1963. This allowed continued use of English after 1965. But under the same Act, the Home Ministry issued circulars making Hindi obligatory for all central government officers, and declared that Hindi would become the official language of India on January 26, 1965.
to the contradictions within a new globalized metropolitan order that is perpetually becoming, in the sense that it is always trying to consolidate itself and claim its peripheries (that can very well take the form of contradictions within the cosmopolitan subject itself) without waging war or by means of exploitation, but rather through a legitimate social contract pertinent to the times. The films in question, I argue, address the difficulty inherent in the process of consolidating this subject by their repetitive tracing of this time of perpetual becoming across a number of films in what I would call for the moment an untimely bildungsroman. The prefix untimely here relates not to the misfit between the contemporary moment and the expression of its contradictions, as I argue, in this set of films. Rather it pertains to the process of tortuously putting together the fitting subject, almost a process of repeatedly reinventing the wheel as it were, in time bracketed out of the historical time that the subject should logically inhabit.

My choice of the term bildungsroman (literally: ‘novel of development’) thus is motivated by the express subject matter of these films, which traces the process of their development into able subjects as much as it is by critical interpretations of certain turns taken by the bildungsroman genre itself in the nineteenth century. My reading of these films is heavily indebted to Jed Esty’s analyses of novels of formation centred upon the imperial subject historically contemporaneous to the last phase of colonialism. The protagonists caught in the cycle of an endless and ‘unseasonable youth’ (terminated only through death in certain instances), argues Esty, are symptomatic of “the dissonance between hypermodernization in the metropolitan core and underdevelopment in the colonial periphery—a defining feature of the modernist world— [which made] itself felt in the very fabric of novelistic time.”

Citing further examples from Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Kipling’s *Kim*, Esty argues that through “[m]etamorphosis, dilation, truncation, consumption, inversion: these forms spectacularly thwart the realist proportions of biographical time that had, from its inception, defined the bildungsroman.” Esty mediates his argument through Franco Moretti’s claim that “the European bildungsroman’s historical vocation

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311 Jed Esty, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Colony and the Adolescence of Modern fiction,’ p.72
312 Ibid.
was to manage the effects of modernization by representing it within a safe narrative scheme.”

“At a socially symbolic level, then” Esty concludes, “the dynamic tension between youth and adulthood in the nineteenth-century bildungsroman plays out as a struggle between the open-ended temporality of capitalism and the bounded, countertemporality of the nation.”

Expanding upon this further in his subsequent volume *A Shrinking Island*, Esty argues that the colonial subject is portrayed as endlessly immature and thus “not yet ready” for self-governance. Taking Esty’s guiding question “is there a significant symbolic relationship between uneven development in colonial modernity […] and anti-developmental plots in canonical literature of the same period?” I stretch and adapt his problematic to situate the post-globalization cosmopolitan subject perpetually in the process of becoming at the heart of my argument to attempt to arrive at some equally productive conclusions about the narratives of disability that I take as the subject of this chapter. It is the constant move to wilfully regress the subject that, for all practical purposes, should have been already constituted and ready to take its place at the centre of the drama of globalization, and the repeated demonstration of its consolidation into a semblance of finitude that ironically points to its instability.

The other axis of enquiry that I seek to activate in this chapter concentrates on the question of film form, or to be more precise, it is about the legitimacy of the popular Indian film form with relation to its position as a bearer of national culture in a global market. Both the films that I select for analysis in this section, *Black* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2005) and *Ghajini* (A.R.Murugadoss, 2010), have been loosely adapted from other films: the former from *The Miracle Worker* (Arthur Penn, 1962) and the latter from *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000). This is primarily of importance because the task of translation involved in adapting these ‘stories’ and their ‘telling’ to the conventional idiom of Bombay cinema throws into relief the terms on which such difference is perceived self-reflexively by the

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313 Ibid. p.73
314 Ibid. p.74.
316 Jed Esty, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Colony and the Adolescence of Modern fiction,’ p.72
317 Penn’s film itself was a screen adaptation of William Gibson’s 1959 play of the same name.
filmmakers. This is in contradistinction to the exercise of filmmaking competence that is entailed in the ‘cinema of imitation’ which Madhava Prasad describes as an impetus to replicate styles, and shot by shot remakes of films from Hollywood and the larger corpus of world cinema. However, it does relate to the dispersal of ‘Bollywood’ within a wider media space where its implications as a culture industry can perhaps best be encapsulated in Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s concept of the “cinema effect” which is “a wide spread social tendency towards evoking film mainly for the purpose of re-presenting or re-definition or, even, evisceration of the cinema: of reprocessing the cinema in order to make it available for varied uses outside the movie theater […] so that [as] a film becomes Bollywood, it develops a pure evocative de-narrativised charge.” One of the outcomes of Bollywood being placed within a larger culture industry was on the one hand, a further fragmentation of the various elements that constitute what Madhava Prasad calls the portmanteau or omnibus film. Its ‘heterogeneous form of manufacture’ is opposed to the organic or serial form of manufacture which became prevalent in the studio era of the Classical Hollywood System. This rendered Hindi popular cinema into an assemblage of prefabricated parts, which enabled it to retain its episodic quality. The film could be taken apart in terms of its constituents as there had not been a subsumption of various filmic constituents to “the dominance of a cinema committed towards narrative coherence.” Within the terms of a globalized market, however, it became possible for Bombay cinema, recontextualized as ‘Bollywood,’ to actually celebrate its status as a heterogeneous ensemble of parts. This facilitated the crystallization of a greater dispersability of cinema into discrete constituent parts, of more acutely segregated elements (like the item number), while at the same time flagrantly recognizing the extraneousness of their existence for the narrative.

Revisiting his concerns about the state of the narrative in a much later piece Prasad argues that the characteristic drive for the current phase of Indian cinema is

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320 Madhava Prasad, Ideology of the Hindi Film, p. 45
321 Madhava Prasad, ‘The Age of Imitation’
Cinema had become, according to Prasad, a ‘reflexive commodity’ “the impetus [for which] is ideological, the pressure of a vacuum in the ideological realm […] the textual form is no longer a spontaneous reflection of established cultural conventions but a self-conscious reproduction of its features”323. “On the one hand”, Prasad argues, “it maintains a formal continuity with the past in a reflexive resort to the rhetorical features; on the other it displays an anxiety to be rid of the thematic and ideological limitations of that earlier model, using Hollywood as a counter model.”324 I will demonstrate in the next section how both these characterisations of Bombay cinema become emphatically relevant for Black and Ghajini in approaching the problem of consolidating a stable subject in and of cinema from two different directions.

III The Apparent Disavowal of the Bollywood Spectacle: Unpacking the Black Box

The terms of entry in the Foreign Film Category of the Academy Awards stipulate that the official language of the submitting country must be the predominant language of the movie. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, responding to a question about the appropriateness of Black as an entrant to the Oscars stated “that is not an issue at all. The language of Black [is] sign language […] all around the world, people have reacted to the universal language in the film. Most of 'Black' is about sound and silence. And they do speak in Hindi. English is only there in patches. […] I do believe that 'Black' has great merits in terms of performances and technicality. More importantly, it is about an Indian reinterpreting the life of such a great international soul as Helen Keller.” 325

It helps to isolate the key terms ‘international’ and ‘universal’ (to be read against 'Indian' or 'local') in the context of global popular culture, in which Bollywood already plays a significant role in terms of its difference from the Hollywood mode of production. This gives us the necessary points of entry into possible

322 Ibid. p.41.
323 Ibid.
324 Ibid. p.42
325 ‘When the Telly goes Black’ in The Telegraph Calcutta, 21 September 2005, p. 25. Black is a loose adaptation of the 1962 movie The Miracle Worker, which focuses on Anne Sullivan's struggle to educate Helen Keller.
arguments about the formulation of an arguably new cinematic aesthetic, and the necessity of reinterpreting, or reconstituting a familiar narrative in terms of sounds and silence that also refers to the conventional ‘Bollywood’ image-spectacle and its apparent absence in Black. It was, in fact, within a search for new representative modes, conventions and idioms, as well as a renewed drive for an aesthetic legitimization for the kind of Bombay cinema now roughly categorized as ‘Bollywood,’ that Bhansali’s cinema must be located.

Is Bhansali’s specific interest in the motif of inarticulacy in Khamoshi: The Musical (1996) and its return in Black (2005) to be read as a departure from the two relatively formulaic spectaculars, Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (1999) and Devdas (2002), that intervene between them? If Khamoshi and Black are indeed to be seen as attempts to address the problem of what constitutes the Indian film, what kind of counterfoil could the riddling presence of the other films present to our argument? Bhansali’s first three films, taken in succession, I argue, are at one level duplicating the exact process of the untimely bildungsroman that is built around the disabled protagonist. Taken together, Bhansali’s cinema follows its own tortuous trajectory of painstakingly accumulating and legitimizing by numbers the constituents of the legitimate Indian film form, albeit with an obsessive emphasis on the song and dance segment.

In Khamoshi: The Musical (1996), Bhansali’s first film, the contradiction between the terms of the title manifests itself on the narrative register and in the film’s self-imposed schizophrenia between a social realist content and the musical that it seeks to accommodate within the same structure. Annie Joseph, born of deaf-mute parents is literally torn between the world of silence and abject poverty and its fantastical obverse. The distinction between the two worlds becomes a structural necessity for Khamoshi where each musical segment is counterpointed by a catastrophic narrative crisis (Annie’s brother dies in an accident, her father is further disabled by an accident in which he burns his hand, her mother has a debilitating stroke). Conversely, moments of crisis are relieved by the juxtaposition of resplendent musical interludes. A lap dissolve, that shows Annie’s passage from childhood to maturity through a distended phase of mourning over her younger brother’s untimely death, is followed by the arrival of her imminent
lover in the film, when the streets of Goa break out in an impromptu carnival around Annie, and entire localities, masqued dancers, fisherwomen and odd pedestrians join the festivities.

Old musical instruments, a piano and a gramophone, are tellingly foregrounded and threatened with extinction at crucial points in the narrative. To perhaps further accentuate the divide separating the two worlds, Khamoshi has Helen playing Annie’s grandmother Mariamma in a clever reference to the item numbers of Bombay cinema’s yesteryears. When her piano is sold and carried away, Mariamma placates the two children with a song, to which the film complies by shifting gears into a choreographed and stylized procession in slow-motion with the piano at the centre, thus turning the poignant moment into another collective celebration of music. Annie, destined to become a singer, is literally torn between her responsibility as the sole means of communication for her parents in their bleak silent world and the life in music that Raj, her lover, offers her.

For Bhansali, this establishment of the musical would function as a space-clearing gesture for his next film, Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam (1999), which takes place in an extended family of high musical tradition overseen by a stern patriarch. The setting allows for the incorporation of a plethora of festivities—Diwali, a wedding, a kite-flying festival, Karwa Chauth—which allows for the use of an extensive repertoire of folk forms performed and re-presented within the film. Bhansali clearly had begun to trace his own genealogy of the musical into various existing Indian folk forms, thus effectively substantiating the authenticity of the form.

If the foregrounding, acknowledgement, and legitimization of the musical appear to be the subtext of Khamoshi, in Black it is the full-fledged violent exorcising of the generic constituents of Bollywood that validates it as an international film. In the process, Bhansali reverses the accumulative impetus of this bildungsroman of sorts of the popular Indian film form itself that he has constructed through Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam and Devdas. Internationalism in these terms entails a wilful move towards debility as far as Black’s expressive vocabulary is concerned. The displacement of formal concerns into narrative operates at yet another register in Bhansali, as I have tried to show in the context of his earlier films, as
successive exercises in narrativizing and alleviating the guilt of the popular against the persistent discourse of ‘good meaningful cinema’ and the critique of popular cinema that the popular had begun to internalize from the FFC era.

To understand the kind of purchase I am trying to establish between Michelle’s condition in *Black* and the body of the text itself, it is useful to consider Tim Walters’ observations about Lars von Trier’s *The Idiots* (1998) through which he explores the connections between the director’s politics of production and the express narrative content of the film (in which a group of men and women take turns to pretend to be mentally disabled in front of total strangers in public places). Walters argues that:

the spassing (or sustained faking of mental disability) on the part of the film's characters is ideologically reflected by the seemingly amateurish precepts of its construction […] the seemingly perverse and disruptive act of spassing in *The Idiots* is a self-reflexive allusion to the technical prescriptions of the 'Vow of Chastity' […] forging a critical connection between the transformative powers of unmastering oneself both as a director and with regard to the practices of everyday life. 326

If in *The Idiots* form and content mirrored each other to effect an annulment of the bourgeois self, I would argue that in *Black*, Devraj Sahai’s acts of regimenting Michelle’s world of wanton tactility similarly duplicates Bhansali’s act of paring down the very excesses of ‘Bollywood’ that he had tried to legitimize in his earlier three films.

*Black*’s mise-en-scene is deliberately made bereft of any time- or place-stamps, or of known bearers of meaning from Bollywood. It provides a fitting backdrop for its central character Michelle, who represents an equally recalcitrant space that refuses to yield meaning, and that is deliberately rendered inaccessible to the audience. Michelle lacks sight and hearing, the very faculties that we as spectators exercise in our act of viewing a film and thus, all channels of our identification with her foreclosed, Michelle exists, is made to exist for us, as pure object, abject

object, soon to be absorbed into language with the mediation of Devraj Sahai, her instructor. Ravi K. Chandran, the cinematographer for *Black*, observes in an interview that Bhansali, till date, had made “colourful films with many songs” in which regard *Black* was a departure in the absence of both. For the film, added Chandran “we predominantly used black […] for the set design, lighting scheme and costumes.”

This preponderance of black, in conjunction with the vaulted high-ceilinged interiors constructed for Michelle’s home—featuring paintings in classical European styles, marble statues and artefacts—gives the film a visual style that reviewers have described as gothic, medieval or Christian. While this at one level attests to the international feel that Bhansali was aiming for in terms of the film’s stylistic remove from Bollywood it also lends itself to the mobilization of other iconographic associations. *Black* does in effect foreground a distinctly gothic privileging of the senses, an exploration of spaces, objects, surfaces, a hyper-tactility of the image so to say, that at the same time seeks to strip it of familiar mechanisms of meaning making. Ironically, this particular instance of induction of the gothic style, which has a rich history of its own generic subversion of the familiar, of displacements into another (often supernatural) register, of issues of sexuality, identity, bodily limits and constructions, of the brutalities and injustices of the patriarchal family, conventional religion, and class based social structures, becomes in *Black*, a flagrant agenda for the construction of conformity. It explicitly pre-empts all possibilities of any alternative re-alignment or interrogation of either identity or gender by focusing instead on the travails of Michelle’s instructor, Devraj Sahai in disciplining, normalizing and socializing Michelle, and at the same time renders invisible the violence inflicted upon her. Towards the end of the film, Michelle at her graduation ceremony tells the audience that she had in fact seen, touched and experienced god, only she calls him her teacher. To read *Black*’s intensified extension of the Pygmalion trope

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through the gothic, one can refer to Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak’s reading of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* which focuses on the way the novel uses gothic displacement as a platform to dismantle precepts of “male and female individualism articulated in terms of sexual reproduction (family and female) and social subject-production (race and male).” “That binary opposition” Spivak argues, “is undone in Victor Frankenstein’s laboratory—an artificial womb where both projects are undertaken simultaneously, though the terms are never openly spelled out. Frankenstein’s apparent antagonist is God himself as Maker of Man, but his real competitor is also woman as the maker of children.”329 The extraordinary feat accomplished by *Black*, on the contrary, is in its containment of women within the reproductive economy by circumnavigating the woman’s sexuality altogether, as Michelle’s sexuality too is denied. She goes straight from the Freudian nursery—where “the father enters […] and interposes his phallic presence between daughter and her mother […] bearing his irreplaceable prick before him like a wand of office, a conductor’s baton, a sword of severance, signifying the end of the mother’s role as seducer and beloved”330 all of which are roles that Devraj acts out quite literally in the film—to becoming his substitute mother at the very end.

Predictably, unlike *The Miracle Worker* which concluded precisely at the climactic moment when Helen is inducted into language, *Black’s* cycle of regression and Michelle’s painful journey towards language and order is started over with Devraj Sahai’s lapse into Alzheimer’s. The persistence of the untimely bildungsroman is anticipated in the film in exact measures to Michelle’s progress towards normalization. The first indications of his ailment become apparent at the precise moment at which the university hands him, for Michelle, volumes of her course material transcribed in Braille. As Michelle is increasingly empowered to shake off her dependence on Devraj, Devraj himself lapses into incoherence. Fittingly then, Michelle at the precise moment of her complete induction into

329 Ibid. p.56.
language, normalized, shorn of all excesses, her graduation ceremony over, takes charge of Devraj, teaching him to spell, the circle is concluded, but only to start all over again.

The demystification of the last consolatory myth of motherhood in Black is at another level also a denial of pre-existing channels of access to the figure of the ‘woman’. This might well have been subversive in another context but in this case spells instead a severance from the familiar figure of the mother in popular Bombay cinema. Black’s internationalism is thus also achieved through a decontextualization, an attempted dislocation, from the habits and conventions of the popular film form which is not without its own predilections in favour of embracing the new myth of the self-contained individual. To push the analogy in terms of the persistent problem of Bollywood and its illegitimacy a bit further, it would also seem worthwhile to read Michelle and Devraj Sahai’s encounter as Bollywood’s new-found romance with the institution of state endorsed ‘art-film’ in India, and a re-reckoning of the latter’s explicit denial of the former as an essentially lumpen, simple-minded cultural form. Black, vying for internationalism, veering away from the ‘popular’, reverses the equation, aligning our sympathies with authority by allowing Michelle to be estranged from the excesses of the pleasures of tactility, of a sensuality gone astray as it is repeatedly drilled into her that touch can only be language, meaning—the name of the father, or the paternalistic state, if you will.

The tussle is made prominent at the narrative level in the way Michelle is plunged into a terra incognita (her father’s study stripped of all the tactile landmarks with the help of which Michelle is used to navigating her way around it). Michelle’s mother is persuaded, to give up her claim on her child by Devraj Sahai, who repeatedly instills in her a dread of disconnect and abjection as a fate that is inevitable for Michelle if he is not allowed to remedy the malaise (almost as a ventriloquist for the statist delegitimization of Bollywood). Michelle’s modes of embodiment are taken away from her, delegitimized, and the very means of her engagement with her surroundings are altered, reinscribed with a legitimate, necessary violence (for instance, where she’s bodily thrown into an ice cold
fountain). The phallus that will eventually be a “substitute child, a symbol of authority, power [literally] pierces the opacity of her world.”

Michelle in Black becomes an extremely rarefied abstraction of Bhansali’s earlier heroines, pre-pubescent in spirit, perpetually unaware of their own sexuality as prescribed in the appropriate heteronormativity for the new economy. The norm is naturally invisible. For to acknowledge the anchored sexuality of a woman, to make the body carnal, is also to acknowledge history; “the specific breasts of a specific woman” are always determined by the matrices of embodiment, by her period, class, location, etc. In Bhansali what is withheld through the arrested sexuality of his heroines is also the susceptibility of the popular Hindi film to vulgarity and violence (of the unacceptable kind). For Bhansali’s women the body is corporealized through an available vocabulary of stylizations, derived from a repertoire of performative idioms, classical or folk, or merely ‘filmy’, but sanitized, decontextualized and detemporalized to remove the stink of attachment to any specific locale. Bodies are stylized to fit gender directives which can also function as modes of inhabiting the body for the aspiring bourgeois individual. Stylizations derive from and feed the popular cultural vocabulary, the strongest of which in our case is Bollywood. For Michelle, Bhansali chooses an alternative stylization from Chaplin’s tramp figure (the film incorporates in its mise-en-scene several posters of Chaplin’s films like The Kid, 1921, or The Gold Rush, 1925, as signs of this tribute) to compensate for the lack left by the stripping of familiar signs of gendering from Michelle. In cinematographer Chandran’s words, "Sanjay Leela Bhansali was clear about what he wanted—a film with an international reach, clean, clear and true; yet one that transcends the tedium of the so-called art film genre. We had to stand apart and still have people thronging cinema halls. After all, the Rs.18-crore budget demanded a commercial format. We were not catering for a niche audience.”

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331 Ibid. p.125
332 Ibid. p. 110
necessitated that Bhansali compensate one order of accumulation of effects with another in his films, thus producing Hollywood as the accidental repertory of accruals and references for Black.

Bollywood, argues Ashish Rajadhyaksha, makes for an unprecedented dominance of the ‘fourth look’ i.e. where the film directly addresses its audience, acknowledging its presence. When considered in conjunction with the ‘cinema effect,’ the ‘fourth look’ facilitates, as Rajadhyaksha argues:

a particular kind of Bollywood cinema’s now untrammeled, unhindered, production of purely symbolic effects, and its further ability to make these effects available outside cinema, for wider use, for consumption. The cinema becomes now the primary machine for producing and distributing such symbolic constructs.

What also strongly informs this repertoire of symbolic effects, is a celebration of a popular cinephilia, the possibility even within cinema to reproduce the cinema effect by aligning, excavating and internalizing of a popular canon in the form of intertextual references and the invocation and deployment of certain passé but nonetheless recognizable modes of representations and forms of narrative within Bollywood films that are markedly in excess to the diachronic demands of the text (for an example of the camp deployment of this see Om Shanti Om, Farah Khan 2007).

It remains to be argued whether the redundancy or waning of the narrative that is inevitable with the pre-dominance of the ‘fourth look’ and the preponderance of symbolic effects makes it imperative for the narrative to address concerns of form. But the reason, I argue, for the duplication of the process of new subject formation at the levels of form and content in Bhansali is grounded in an entire set of interlacing norms of taste, consumption, on the one hand and selfhood, individualism, aspiration on the other for the subject for which Bollywood is produced in the contemporary cultural economy. Bollywood functions both as a

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334 The first three looks are 1) that of the camera at the pro-filmic, 2) that of the audience at the screen and 3) that of the characters onscreen at each other and at objects which acts as a vehicle for the audience’s look at the screen thus containing it within the logic of textual accountability.

335 From ‘India and the Hindi Cinema: Popular Culture as Survival Strategy’ paper presented at the departmental seminar of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, December, 2005.
mirror and a blueprint for the configuration of this subject as it provides modes of self-styling, produces the rhetoric of emotions, defines the very stuff of feelings, and prescribes what to aspire for, all in terms of the excesses that constitute the specificity of the Bollywood form (for instances of the efficacy of this mode of self-styling it is useful to look at how television serials, most notably from Ekta Kapoor productions, constantly reference Bollywood).

And precisely because Bhansali consciously tries to pare down the excesses of Bollywood at the level of form, the elements (song and dance, subplots, etc.) most readily identified as markers of its difference from Hollywood (the touchstone of ‘international’ cinema that Bhansali had referred to in the context of the Academy Awards), and the fate of its protagonist is also likewise an extreme distillation of the very process of his/her becoming, fleshed out as Michelle’s and Devraj’s hard-earned bildungsromans.

**IV Ghajini: The Acquisition Machine**

In *Ghajini* (2008) (a remake of Director A.R Murugadoss’ Tamil film of the same name) the central protagonist Sanjay Singhania is afflicted with short term memory loss, a condition known as anterograde amnesia. The film is loosely adapted from Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*, as evident from the similarity between the plotlines in which both men fall prey to the disorder as a result of the trauma they suffer at witnessing the brutal murder of their respective partners (in *Ghajini*’s case the fiancée rather than the wife). Both protagonists painstakingly accumulate mementos in the form of written notes, tattoos inscribed on their bodies, and Polaroid snapshots of all significant people and places annotated with descriptions and instructions in order to find and kill the murderer. *Ghajini* attempts to disprove its debt to the original, *Memento*, in the title card that claims that the film is “inspired by some stories and incidents with similar idea and real life incidents of people suffering from short term memory loss” and persists in bolstering this misdirection with a title sequence representing a digitally created skein of neurons that draws our attention to the biological site of the disorder instead. A subsequent segment similarly takes us inside a medical school where the facts of Sanjay’s peculiar malady comes up as a case file.
excavated by a student who wishes to write a project report on the workings of memory. My concern however, lies not so much in the fact of the borrowing itself but in the qualitative transformations in narrative organization that are necessitated by the act of re-presenting the film as a Bollywood blockbuster. *Ghajini*’s re-organization of the plot and its lavish repertoire of narrative embellishments and accruals are thus to be read as movements in the exact opposite direction to *Black*’s disavowal of the Bollywood spectacle. Evidently *Ghajini* has “taken the *Memento* plot, set its non-linearity into chronological order, taken out the actual investigative intrigue and replaced it with a series of convenient coincidences and […] added a full-blown backstory about how the hero met and fell in love with the murder victim, complete with a bunch of songs.” 336 As another tongue in cheek review puts it: “Yup, so we're talking a dumbed-down *Memento* suffering from a severe case of blockbusteritis.”337

*Memento*, says Adrian Gargett, “proposes an ironic re-interpretation of the private eye genre in which the conventional pattern of heroic self-determination played out by Leonard Shelby [the protagonist] is contradicted by a self-conscious critique of the formula carried out by the film’s structure, a critique that sees the hero’s control over the world as illusion.”338 As put by Leonard himself in the last segment (the first in chronological time) “I have to believe that when my eyes are closed the world’s still there.” Leonards’s crisis is symbolized by the film’s title sequence in reverse time which shows the gradual obliteration of a Polaroid snapshot into oblivion. *Memento* undertook a paring down of the subjective anchoring of the narrative in a series of fragmented time segments (arranged in reverse chronological order) that interrogated the tenuous nature of the very perceptual mechanism that collates memory, or by extension sutures narrative


within a film (especially within the Hollywood noir genre that *Memento*’s critical commentary addresses).

*Ghajini* on the other hand revels in the excessive accrual of points of anchoring from which the narrative can unfold, and deliberately incorporates a corpus of trans-textual supplementary data that the spectator can mobilize while watching the film. These references and ‘borrowings’ range from playful spoofs of advertisements (assignments being shot by the advertising agency where Sanjay’s soon to be fiancée, Kalpana, is a model) to the gallery of alternate personas that Sanjay splits into in a fantasy song sequence (fleetingly reminiscent of actor Aamir Khan’s own repertoire, in citing costumes and performative styles from *Ghulam* and *Jo Jeeta wohi Sikander*). Random assemblages of sequences and visuals from elsewhere qualify and inflect the text: a chance sequence from *Amelie* (*Amelie/Kalpana helps a blind man along a busy street while cheerfully narrating everything she sees on the way*), a montage sequence replicated from a Michael Jackson video (‘Black or White’) that Kalpana’s fantasy photo shoot on a ramp concludes with, a domed studio interior painted with an overcast sky from *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998). These are by no means references meant for recognition and reflection but rather form an amenable surface over which the perpetually errant eye of the Bollywood spectator can flit with ease.

In Sanjay the evacuation of memory makes room for a superhuman automaton as a vehicle for action that replaces the subject at the centre. The repeated use of time lapse photography and dissolves do indeed stand for a fracturing of time but it is not of the kind that endangers the cohesion of Sanjay’s consciousness. There are two reasons for this. The first is that Sanjay, once taken out of the romantic prelude that constitutes the ‘back story’ becomes a grotesquely unreal game avatar visually characterized by his exaggerated musculature, the barely there hair with shaved streaks, and an unchanged facial expression of extreme rage. His body replicates the staccato, machine-like movements of the action hero figure from the 3D action game (called *Ghajini: The Game*) that was launched along with the film. The film replicates the perspective of the third person action/assault game

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339 The description of the game here emphasizes the primacy of the action over and above any possible psychological motivation grounded in the narrative: “Experience the story from Sanjay’s unique perspective narrated by Aamir Khan. Hear his voice as he guides you from clue to clue,
by placing the camera behind Sanjay’s Shoulder and in the 360 degree pans around him that establish the terrain of action for the gamer and locates obstacles and adversaries. Sanjay in the throes of anterograde amnesia, unlike *Memento*’s Leonard Shelby, is not the subject in crisis at centre of the narrative that retroactively throws the very notion of narrative coherence out of kilter. Rather, he is an overwrought receptacle for the spectacle, a vehicle for violent visceral action that *Ghajini* presents as part of the pleasure of film watching. The first segment that reveals Sanjay’s extra-normal everyday routine revels in this adrenaline rush—a montage of feet pumping like pistons on a treadmill, fists hitting a boxing speed bag in rapid succession, Sanjay’s body pressing back and forth on a suspended exercise bar—these shots are alternated with ‘flashback’ shots (extreme close-ups from the scene of Kalpana’s brutal murder) not yet introduced at the narrative level. It is this violence exaggerated to its absurd extreme that helps create pathos in *Ghajini* by its sheer contrast with the person that Sanjay used to be. As another reviewer observes:

> Raw rage transforms Aamir Khan’s Sanjay Singhania into a wild animal […] who will show aggression at anyone that appears remotely threatening. At first the extremity of his actions leaves you bewildered, a condition he, too, finds himself in, almost immediately after every assault […] Moreover, when you see the actor […] masked in numerous tattoos of random locations and numbers, the reaction is not that of admiration but of horror. […] Khan looks like a man possessed with fury, consumed by unbridled anger and heartbroken beyond repair. A pitiable lunatic looking to avenge an unseen enemy.340

The evacuation of memory in Sanjay is complete, unlike Shelby whose capacity for recollection has been truncated, atrophied at the scene of the crime that caused clinging to a thin trail of evidence. Use his combat moves to fight your way through the hordes of goons waiting to ambush you. Explore the Ghajini world through his eyes as he moves through the amazing sets from the original movie recreated in the virtual world. Take control of the story and recreate the movie experience on your PC […] Join him as he fights against those who have taken away his past, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake” From publicity review of *Ghajini the Game* at http://www.mouthshut.com/review/Ghajini_Game-160188-1.html accessed 16th February 2011.

his condition. The piecing together of the narrative in *Ghajini*, therefore is no longer a tortuous project undertaken by Sanjay, the automaton, but is delegated to several carriers. A police officer investigating a murder mistakenly committed by Sanjay initiates the first flashback when he discovers Sanjay’s leather-bound journal while searching his apartment. At a later stage of the narrative, a medical student, Sunita, who had been following Sanjay’s case-file activates the second flashback when she starts to read the same journals. Sunita subsequently unearths the turn of events that led to Kalpana’s murder. Kalpana had rescued a group of girls being trafficked on a train and had threatened to unmask industrialist-philanthropist Ghajini Dharmatma as the person behind the trafficking and organ harvesting ring. The narrative from this moment is gleaned in episodes gathered by Sunita from her excavation of newspaper reports in archives, and conversations and interviews in which several other carriers appear in the film—one of the girls who was rescued by Kalpana on the train, a police inspector who came to know about Ghajini’s role in the crimes, had witnessed a conversation between Ghajini and Kalpana, and called Kalpana several times to warn her of the imminent danger.

A huge map of Bombay covers a wall in Sanjay’s apartment in *Ghajini* overlaid and annotated with polaroid snapshots and notes designating spaces and locations (‘Ville Parle’, ‘café’). It is the map for an outsider familiarizing himself to the city, not merely by recording routes of navigation but also through the clear demarcation of spaces one has access to or prefers frequenting. The aspiration to belong, to own space and to mark one’s space in it that had characterized numerous protagonists from other films is concretized here in Sanjay as an intransigent routine clearly coded for all to comprehend. A similar drive underlies the excessive labelling in his apartment of objects—‘cellphone’ ‘house keys.’ It extends to his retinue of attendants who, unlike in *Memento*, are no longer marked by names or any other indications of their own complex lives but are reduced to abstracted designations only in so far as they are of use to Sanjay—Doctor, Assistant, Friend, Gatekeeper. What they also present is an abstracted map for aspirational acquisition.
In this persistent concern that generates a plethora of films that centre their narratives on the trope of disability, we see the construction of disability of a kind that has its exact foil in the discovery of innate talents (as in Aamir Khan’s Taare Zameen Par, 2007) that also qualifies the protagonist as an exceptional individual. Logically therefore, the disability can only be ‘cured’ or compensated for by the discovery and subsequent inculcation, careful nurturing and proper placement of this talent. And here we may posit a connection of the idea of hunar (talent) in Lagaan that sustains the discourse of meritocracy, enterprise and the myth of equal opportunities that bolsters the new liberal economy. If we may quote a refrain from a popular ad jingle for an Airtel advertisement—“chai ke liye jaise toast hota hai, waise har ek friend zaroori hota hai” (like toast for tea, every single friend is of use in their own way). In the most commendable of aspirations, the homo economicus of the new economy is perpetually scavenging for meaning to be found, resources to be utilized, selves to be put together in the worst of situations. As far as the narrative economy of the films are concerned though, the situation must necessarily be portrayed in a manner to render the compensatory move with extraordinary clarity—such that the transition undertaken must seem the most tortuous, the normalcy gained must be rendered the most precious in comparison.

**Conclusion:**

My dissertation traces certain transformations in contemporary Bombay cinema geared towards positing the middle class as its subject and audience. In this I argue certain frameworks, constituted of binaries thrown into relief by the processes of globalization, operate to interpret and order space within cinema to make it amenable for the accommodation of this class. I have shown in my dissertation how a closer look at the process of construction of these perceptual frameworks reveals certain contradictions latent in the conceptions of the middle class in the discursive domain. The representations of the middle class in cinema thus also bring to light the various micro-negotiations necessary for the production of the category of the new middle class outside of cinema.