Disreputable and Illegal Publics
Cinematic Allegories in Times of Crisis

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Cinema has been the central audio-visual medium of our times. Since independence, Indian cinema has provided powerful documentation of key passages in the imaginary world of our society, accessing issues of social justice and transformation, visions of community as well as intimations of social fragmentation, despair and violence. Despite its powerful presence in modern Indian culture, the cinema's institutional history has been a beleaguered one. Mainstream or popular cinema has lacked state recognition as a legitimate cultural form until very recently. As a form of cultural production, governments and cultural elites have regarded it as lacking authenticity and artistic merit, whether measured against the 'traditional' canons of Indian art or international standards of industrial film-making, on the model of the Hollywood cinema. In this sense, even at the peak of its influence, between the 1950s and 1970s, the cinema lacked cultural standing.

Discourses about the cinema are discourses about its publics, their cultural status and cognitive dispositions, and are often governed by anxiety about the unpredictable nature of mass culture. Regulatory frameworks such as censorship, mandatory state documentary screenings, and a regime of financial exactions were used to control and shape the contents of the cinema. Its low status in governmental and elite critical circles persisted until the 1980s, when its identity as a mass audio-visual format was threatened by the falling off of cinema audiences in the wake of video piracy. This threat has persisted in shifting technological formats – VHS, VCD, DVD – and competing delivery circuits – video parlours, media markets, satellite and cable broadcasting – down to present times. However, the new globalized framework of the 1990s has seen the emergence of cinema as an object of cultural investment by the government. Industrial recognition was given for the first time in 1998, and the Information and Broadcasting Ministry and Indian missions abroad have showcased high-end popular products in international markets, festivals and cultural centre

screenings. The diaspora market for a cinema with lush production values provides the context for this new engagement, indicating the substantial returns on film exports, and the new cultural confidence of a globalizing nation. Sectors of the industry have made a bid to create corporate structures, financial accounting and transparency to woo legitimate finance. And the cinema as exhibition venue has been reorganised though the development of multi-screen halls often tied to ancillary returns in mall-style ventures. In this development, the cinema has moved from a mass cultural form disreputable in the eyes of the state and the elite, to a burgeoning part of an entertainment industry offering substantial returns in global and local markets.

The downside of this triumphal narrative lies in the persistence of old forms: illicit finance and underworld dealings, even if recent reports suggest that policing has curtailed the influence of extortion gangs in the industry. But even leaving aside the lack of comprehensive industrial transformation, the pitch has been queered by a new configuration of the disreputable public as a non-legal one. If the cinema and its publics earlier lacked cultural standing, moral and critical opprobrium, and state repressive and regulatory frameworks have also shifted onto a monitoring and policing of the illicit media market and media public which consumes pirated video copies of films. From the disreputable public we move into the register of a specifically illegal public. Publics who are not, and never will be, the imagined publics of expensive multiplexes are accessing film through these new technological formats. On the other hand, regulation appears increasingly helpless in the face of the cheap and easily available copying technologies that have entered the media market. How matters will move from now, and whether the current media crisis of cinema will set up new synergies between digital versions and cheaper projection venues is open to speculation. But this dispersed media public, illicit, ungovernable, will remain a key dimension of media futures.[1]

From the disreputable, inauthentic and unsystematic cultural form we have transited to the outlines of a legitimate cultural commodity held ransom by a culture of the copy avidly participated in by a dispersed film public. From a historical sketch of the public for the cinema, I would now like to turn to a more speculative, allegorical register: that of the public imagined by the cinema. This is specifically a public imagined in situations of crisis, brokering a relationship between political and normative protocols, constraints and their corrosion, and transformative energies. This exercise stands separate from the narrative of the marginal and illicit public I have recounted. But I will hold onto an overlapping thematic to help us move registers and think of parallels. Focusing on the popular cinema, this essay tries to highlight certain political and formal resonances which emerge in the cinema's recurrent engagement with the subject of crime. Crime hardly dominates the narrative imagination of the popular, and there are a number of other genres, such as the mythological, the historical, the social, and the family or family social (critical to the recent diaspora film), which have been important to the differentiated output of the popular cinema. Crime films were initially a subset of the social, the genre understood to narrativize modern social issues. However, arguably, the crime film had a distinctive significance, providing an important format to address issues of social indignity and marginality. And, in terms of its characteristic topography, the crime film genre accesses a dimension critical to the shaping of

marginal and illicit publics. This is the domain of urban being as a significant experiential and experimental space for the reinvention of selves.[2]

From the 1950s onwards, Bombay cinema has taken crime as a key framework to generate a subaltern image of the city. In films such as *Awara* (Raj Kapoor, 1951), *Baazi* (Guru Dutt, 1951), *Aar Paar* (Guru Dutt, 1954), *Taxi Driver* (Chetan Anand, 1954), *House No. 44* (M.K. Burman, 1955), *CID* (Raj Khosla, 1956), *Howrah Bridge* (Shakti Samanta, 1958) the cinema addressed criminality as a critical index of the hierarchies and prejudices of the urban social order, and to explain how criminals were made by society. However, this was not merely an exercise in social argumentation. Criminality provided a particular access to the city as experience and afforded experimentation with film style. The genre gives the spectator access to the sensorium of the city in novel ways. As Moinak Biswas has argued, these films moved out of the living room and the studio generated street – what he refers to as a studio style governed by static interiors and flat lighting.[3] They moved the spectator into the dynamics of city shooting, and also drew on the complexities of chiaroscuro lighting to render the narrative world in terms of shadow, depth of field and density of *mise-en-scène*. Generically, the chase sequence and the rapid alternation in editing strategies endemic to the form of the thriller simulated the viscerality of everyday speed and distracted attention. And new spaces, gangster hide-outs, warehouses for smuggled goods, and, of course, more familiar spaces figured through novel techniques, such as the gambling den and cabaret bar, surfaced into view. While pegged to a social justice theory of crime, these films also highlight the city in terms of moral ambiguity, the thrill of action and movement, the allure of danger.

This type of generic engagement was to be taken from the sphere of the crime thriller into a definite investment in urban action and spectacle in the 1970s. As many writers have argued, this cycle of films, associated with the screenwriters Salim-Javed and the star Amitabh Bachchan, indicated a basic shift in social and political perspective. Now the state was no longer seen as the arbiter of social justice, and was seen to be riddled with complicity, corruption, or, at best, incompetence. As Madhava Prasad has written, the police always arrive too late, signifying the toppling of the state from a position of symbolic value. Authority lies elsewhere, in the 'traditional authority' of the family, or, more commonly, in the protean figure of a hero at once lonely but also bearing historical ties to subaltern community.[4] At its core, the problematics of crime and violence in the cities of Indian cinema complicated the notion that class could be a coherent model on which to build a strategy of social transformation. Amitabh's characters derive from realist typage and display a representational capacity as the worker who has the moral and physical courage to take on exploiters and represent his class. But, in films such as *Deewar*, (Yash Chopra, 1974) he demonstrates this only to sidestep the representational function. For, in a world which was increasingly to see the demise of trade union forms (*Deewar* captures this in the destiny of Amitabh's father), the film appears to anticipate this and to take its hero into a world of crime and the illicit accumulation of wealth, although, of course, in the name of the mother. This body of work is thus entangled in a particular vision of the de-legitimisation, not only of the state as vehicle of social justice, but of critical representational institutions such as the trade union.

Central to the formal shifts in the treatment of crime is a new sense of the city and subjectivity. In Amitabh's presence and formal articulation, the monumental hero who represented a myriad of the displaced and homeless, is architecturally of apiece with the city, its high-rises and its breadth of field relayed through the cinemascope lens. In films such as *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (Prakash Mehra, 1978) Amitabh renders the city experience as a philosophy of present time, living in the moment and in the face of adversity. There is something here which speaks not only of fortitude, but also of the thrill of challenge. But the challenge is also a narrative one, and one of moral economy, where earlier messages urging a striving for social justice through the state were derailed: a more perilous path was embraced, and often, in Amitabh, one with tragedy built into the choice. As a number of writers have argued, these films function as a critique of existing developmental paradigms and the authoritarian modernization of the 1970s[5] which would culminate in the Emergency dictatorship of 1975-1977, where amidst a wider attack on civil liberties, the poor of the cities were uprooted and subject to population control. In the displacement of earlier social justice vistas, and their exchange for the uncertainty of a criminalized subalternity, the period maps a critical frame for our times.

Ankush (N. Chandra, 1985) suggests how the social imagination, and the imagination of the city, has shifted from the time of Amitabh's ascendancy. Here Bombay is clearly on its way to becoming Mumbai, the nomenclature that a regionalist imagination has now given the megalopolis. The film opens with a gang contest over right of way for processions celebrating the *Ganesh Chaturthi* festival, a key, and contested, institution of religious, regional and social identity since the late nineteenth century.[6] The film deploys a documentary evocation, with its semantics of street corner, neighbourhood and bazaar. Contra the 1970s movies, a strong sense of locality emerges here. So too does a new configuration of the protagonist. In the Amitabh cycle, city and hero were architecturally of apiece, instituting a monumental sense of city, protagonist and, indeed, of the cinema as an institution of mass culture. From the mid-1980s, alongside the continued prominence of the singular hero, such as Sunny Deol (e.g. *Arjun*, Rahul Rawail, 1985), we observe a scaled-down, interdependent construction of the protagonist, that of the male group which clusters at the street corner. It is as if monumental hero and city have been exchanged for a more fragmented, localized sense of the urban, and a sense of distended rather than eventful time; as if this could be one day, everyday. The film was made in the backdrop of the decimation of the huge Bombay textile labour strike, and, in turn, the substantial dispersal of the city's textile industry. The four main characters gesture both to this, and posit a more general condition. This is of the educated unemployed who have been unable to adjust to the demands of a corrupt society, again an important distinction from the uneducated orphan who was to be important to the Amitabh cycle.

This group's sense of status is under attack. They are fallen, and this sense of unjust social demotion embitters them. Public assertion is critical, and takes the form of contests with other gangs. All of this supports the thesis that the film is like a propaganda vehicle for the Shiv Sena,[7] a political formation which drew heavily for its influence on local cadres and networks. It also, in its social configuration, anticipates the national conflicts that were to erupt a few years later. In 1989, VP Singh, the Prime Minister of a minority government,

decided to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission on reservation of jobs for historically backward classes. Public protests followed, an elite public arguing that such policies would cut at meritocracy and brake India's developmental dynamic. More complicatedly, a high caste, lower middle-class, a more complicated and distinctly subaltern population, expressed a frustration and despair in the face of what they saw to be a drying up of the limited avenues they had for securing regular employment. A spate of suicides resulted.

Of course, it is not in the imagination of an *Ankush* to capture this last scenario. Male bravado is its chosen route, as the protagonists undertake the annihilation of a corrupt bevy of businessmen and accept their guilt and public execution in the manner of martyrs to a social cause. That such trajectories were not the only ones possible in the imagination of the city is indicated by two other films of the period, *Nayakan* (Mani Ratnam, 1987),[8] and *Parinda*, (Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1988).[9] *Deewar* was meant to gesture to the career of Haji Mastaan, a gangster who was also seen as something of a godfather figure in the Bombay of that time. While *Deewar* hardly touches on such issues, the Tamil film *Nayakan* alludes to the paternalist legitimacy of the criminal in its evocation of the important Tamil gangster, Varadarajan Mudaliar, for its protagonist Velu Naicker. The narrative could be read as pitted against the emergent Shiv Sena, sons of the soil, vision for the city, which took as its first target the immigrant from Tamilnadu and Kerala. The film adapted Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) for its story set in the Tamil slums of the megalopolis, doubly marginalized by poverty and ethnic subordination. Here *Ankush*'s iconography of the violent slum neighbourhood is carried on with a different inflection. Kamalahasan essays a bravura condensation of Brando and Pacino's performances, and, perhaps, the iconic Tamil star, Sivaji Ganesan.[10] The iconography of the chaste, *dhoti* wearing leader is familiar from Tamil politics, and political resonances are echoed, too, in the way art director Thotta Tharani and cameraman PC Sriram stage Naicker's home. Rather than the sepulchral inner world of Don Vito Corleone, this is a brightly lit space blocked to emphasise frontal registers for those who supplicate the Tamil mobster. There are suggestions here of the architecture of the political realm. The film subtly traverses the field from crime to politics in such a *mise-en-scène*, suggesting not only the links but also the rhetorical structures through which constituencies converge around the image of the leader.

Nayakan takes the lexicon of slum/crime/politics into a different direction from that signposted by N. Chandra. But there is also an internal, deconstructive cinematic relay in the re-imagining of the contemporary. Vinod Chopra's *Parinda* takes the figure of the Tamil gangster, strips him of political functions or references, and makes him the ambiguous psychotic villain, Anna (Nana Patekar). This is not so much a depoliticization of the ethnic narrative of Bombay subaltern life as a generic, and indeed, realistic description of the cross-ethnic dimensions of the criminal world. As Ira Bhaskar has pointed out, gothic elements now emerge strongly in the genre.[11] Bombay is the night city alternately composed of anonymous crowds, or an empty canvas for the staging of irrupting violence. And it is a city where the subject is never quite remote from the enquiring eyes of a malevolent network which may penetrate law courts, sacred religious spaces, and the household itself. The specifically gothic rendering emerges in the revelations about Anna's factory system,

the city's underbelly. Apparently organized to produce drugs under the guise of an oil press, perceptually it is only available to us as a dis-assembly line for the production of death. An assembly of steel vises, industrial mixers and chutes mangle the bodies of Anna's opponents and betrayers, and produce them as destroyed end-product. Romantic conventions too are disrupted. As Ranjani Mazumdar has shown, the putative formation of a couple that bids to escape from the criminal nexus is constantly interrupted, as the domestic idyll is threatened by anonymous telephone calls and sudden blackouts. *Film noir* and gothic elements function to destablize the romance fiction otherwise available in the Bombay cinema of the time.[12]

As we enter the preceding decade, an extraordinary one in terms of political, economic and technological transformations, there is an emblematic set of films produced by the Bombay cinema that in some fashion stand by themselves. Ambivalence towards the certitudes of state justice and moral economy is here compounded by complication of character motivation and narrative explanation. *Baazigar* (Abbas-Mustan, 1993) stands in contrast to the way crime and violent assertion are located in relationship to community and public forms. Shahrukh Khan plays a protagonist whose motivations for a series of malevolent manoeuvres, including the murder of a number of innocents, remains mysterious until two-thirds of the way through the film. Until this point, it seems the objective is to ensure a ruthless business takeover. Negative flashbacks appear to suggest that there is, indeed, an explanation for his homicidal behaviour. The explanation, when it comes, justifies actions in terms of standard paradigms: revenge on behalf of the family, and, in particular, of the mother. Nevertheless, the wilful suspension of motivation suggests that the narrative invites spectatorial immersion in a world without moral economy, one driven entirely by cutthroat business logic. Mazumdar has suggested how the story of *Baazigar* highlights the phenomenon of the modern city as one composed of strangers, a perilous space where identity is duplicitous.[13] This persuasive observation dovetails with a sense of how the narrative manipulates generic codes and moral strictures, generating a vision of anomie, where the city is entirely deprived of the resources of community forms or public registers. At the climax of the film, when Khan is viciously attacked by his opponents, there is a moment when he flails around, hitting wildly at the air, the earth, his entire surroundings, suggesting a moment of dread, where the sources of his trauma appear beyond personification. *Baazigar* was swiftly followed by another essay on the protagonist as isolated entity. In *Darr* (Yash Chopra, 1994), Khan plays a psychotic; a weak, secretive entity who stalks a young woman, the fiancée of a heroic naval commando. The film splits spectatorial identification between the psychotic and the powerful representative of the state, rendering the concluding victory of the latter – amounting to the execution of the obsessive counter-hero – as distinctly ambivalent in its resonance.

These films signify an important transition, in a sense severing the Bombay popular cinema from its paradigmatic moral economy. While the psychotic cycle ended quickly, it opened up a space from which another dimension of the Amitabh ur-text, that of the criminal underworld, acquired a distinct generic shape. The gangster film appears, alongside the family diaspora film, to be the main film genres to emerge in the last decade. Arguably, the gang can be productively interpreted not so much as pathology, but as morphology of the

social organism. In this sense, it has been present since the 1950s cycle of crime films, and carries on through the Amitabh cycle of the 1970s. These films outline certain basic structures, if we leave aside the social causality through which they are framed. These structures include a visceral, instinctual assertion of self; the constitution of a male social world, with distinct hierarchies of leader, protégé, perhaps a competitor, and a more or less colourful set of followers. The gang offered for viewer engagement and empathy is distinguished from other gangs in terms of skills, daring, in a word, its charisma. But it is also distinguished by a morality based on group loyalty. However, the gang is inevitably a vulnerable form defined by a sense of impending doom. It is threatened not only by the law, but also by the possibility of shifting loyalties (competition within the group, realignment with other groups); changes in the leader's perception of group needs in ways which may clash with others in the group; and external questions, such as the way in which other loyalties and pressures, primarily here of the family as moral unit, may act upon the behaviour of individual group members. It is the last which, of course, runs through films from *Awara*, through *Deewar* and down to *Parinda*, where the protégé becomes subject to a moral probity that he cannot finally ignore, and causes him to take on the leader or the gang structure itself, leading to its annihilation.

The individual hero, the leader's protégé, provides the main source of viewer identification in the pre-1990s cinema, although such a paradigm carries on into films such as the Aamir Khan vehicle, *Ghulam* (Vikram Bhatt, 1998). On the other hand, in instances such as *Hathyar* (JP Dutta, 1989), the hyper-viscerality of the hero makes him inherently unstable, a weapon out of control, and one charged with the hubris of an earlier upbringing amongst feuding Rajput clans. What is distinctive to the 1990s is a new sense of horizontality in the constitution of the group. I will take Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (1999) as a model of this transformation. Firstly, Satya, a migrant to the city, entirely lacks, or refuses, memory or identity. There is no space or time outside the here-and-now for him, making him properly anonymous. He proceeds through a series of visceral responses to the everyday weave of brute power which surrounds him, both in society and, decisively, in jail. It is this sheer indifference to authority which captures the attention of Bhiku, a gang leader who is part of a larger edifice in which Bhau Thakre, the gangster who would be politician, is the ultimate authority. Satya's disregard for hierarchy leads Bhiku's gang into daring gambits, including the flouting of Bhau Thakre's rulings, and the assassination of the Bombay police chief who has pulled out all stops in dealing with the gangs. While Satya develops a romantic attachment, this finally remains external to the logic of the 'professional' engagement which drives him. There is sentiment built into the gang universe in Satya and Bhiku's friendship, based on a giving of mutual recognition and honour. The generic universe provides a vision of urban positioning where the anonymous migrant without history or moorings can enter the city, prove his credentials and then draw upon a network, a set of resources which will provide him with a 'job', a dwelling, a share of the spoils. In turn, he can work out the logic of such a network by destabilizing the systems of authority which frame it.

The networked nature of the universe is perhaps technologically highlighted in the way mobile phones facilitate command and coordination. Deployed in the staging of an assassination of a film producer in an early sequence, its logic is interrupted when a phone call

relays the command of Bhau Thakre to desist from inter-gang rivalry. The gang has to completely break free, constitute its own network and follow its own logic in order to establish itself against its treacherous competitors. (When it goes back on this, accepting Thakre's treacherous offer of renewed ties, the result is disastrous, Thakre killing a naïve Bhiku). There is also a stylized sense in which the social is penetrated by the network. Steadicam hurtles through the narrative world, yoking spectator to the chase sequence and tumultuous movements from street to interior, cutting a swathe through the city and breaking down divisions between inside and outside, home and the world. At the same time, the camera in *Satya*, a highly self-conscious one, often remains at a distance from this swirling action, constituting itself as a super-ordinate intelligence. It facilitates a vision of this cutting, this scything through hierarchies, orchestrating a new level field for initiative that also disestablishes the symbolism of entrenched authority. As I have pointed out elsewhere, a climactic scene has Satya cutting the ground from the deployment of the Ganesh image in contemporary politics. He breaks into Thakre's display of symbolic authority, stabbing the newly anointed politician as he presents himself and his followers before the deity to seal his newfound legitimacy. A top shot places the camera above the deity, now strangely liberated from its entanglements in the effrontery of an exploitative politics, as both look down on the dead gangster politician floating in the surf below.[14]

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From the mass institutional format of the 1970s, which condenses its marginalized public into the monumental hero straddling the architectural expanse of the city, the cinema dwindles. It eerily anticipates the diminishing of state legitimacy, large-scale forms of production, and representational institutions such as the unions, and appears to lurch into decline along with these forms in the 1980s. If the 1980s saw the first substantial technological inroads into the cinematic institution, with the emergence of video piracy and intimations of a more dispersed media space, there also emerges a more fragmentary imagining of the city. A new sense of locality and a downscaled, interdependent protagonist for the marginal public provides the ground for a variety of imaginations, of chauvinist assertion, ethnic contest and even cinematic self-reflexivity. There is a scary other side to this scenario, a subjectivity entirely adrift of community resource or public reference, as in the early appearances of Shahrukh Khan. This alienated figure is the nightmarish other scene of public imagination, inhabiting an isolated, obsessional universe. The stranger city of Mazumdar's formulation here rends the moral economy of cinematic convention and spectatorial coherence. The scalpel like severing ushers in a new logistics of space and subjectivity. The underworld provides a morphology of horizontal, non-hierarchical space. Indifferent to history, the anonymous subject of the contemporary contemplates the city as a space for self-assertion, and discovers the networks and resources that it offers in the perilous hideaways that exist cheek by jowl with the everyday world of middle-class tenements. Dispersed, ungovernable, here is an allegory that refers back to the very conditions of spectatorship and media consumption of our present.

NOTES

1. For ongoing research, see publications of the Sarai project, *Publics and Practices in the History of the Present* (PPHP): *Old and New Media in Contemporary India*. Most recently, Rakesh Singh ed. *Medianagar* (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2004).
2. The following arguments come in part from my "Selves Made Strange: Violent and Performative Bodies in the Cities of Indian Cinema, 1974-2003" in *body.city* (Tulika Books, 2003, Delhi). This draws attention to political transformations, including the identity violence, that precedes and follows on from the *Hindutva* movement, a phenomenon not addressed in the present essay.
3. Biswas, Moinak. *Historical Modes of Realism* (PhD thesis, 2003, Monash University).
4. Prasad, M. Madhava. *The Ideology of the Hindi Film*, (Oxford University Press, 1998, Delhi).
5. Prasad, *The Ideology of the Hindi film*; Ranjani Mazumdar, "From Subjectification to Schizophrenia: The Angry Man and the Psychotic Hero" in Ravi S. Vasudevan edited, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2000, Delhi).
6. Kaur, Raminder. *Performative Politics and the Cultures of Hinduism: Public Uses of Religion in Western India*, (Permanent Black, 2003, Delhi).
7. This is the argument put forward by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen in *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema,* 2nd edition, (Oxford University Press, 1999, Delhi) p.469.
8. For *Nayakan*, see Lalitha Gopalan, *A Cinema of Interruptions* (British Film Institute, 2002, London).
9. Mazumdar, Ranjani. "Ruin and the Uncanny City: Memory, Despair and Death in Parinda", *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life.*
10. I thank Indira Chandrashekhar for this observation.
11. Bhaskar, Ira. "Melodrama and the Urban Action Film". Paper presented at the workshop, *The Exhilaration of Dread: Genre, Narrative Form and Film Style in the Urban Action Film*, Sarai, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, November 2001.
12. Mazumdar, Ranjani. "Ruin and the Uncanny City".
13. Mazumdar, Ranjani. *Urban Allegories* (PhD dissertation, 2001, New York University).
14. See my "The Exhilaration of Dread: Genre, Narrative Form and Film Style in the Urban Action Film", *Sarai Reader 02.*