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# Space, Screen and the Indian Multiplex Film

**Debjani Mukherjee**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at how radical changes in contemporary Indian popular cinema have been engendered by the arrival of the multiplex as a cinematic exhibition space. Multiplexes first appeared in 1997, but since then they have proliferated across the urban Indian landscape, overrunning traditional single screen theatres. Their rise has engendered thematic and aesthetic shifts in popular cinema, as it breaks away from the omnibus format of the films of old single screen theatres and diversifies into a wide range of forms and styles. This shift is best manifested in the ‘multiplex film’ – an umbrella term for a range of alternative, genre-diverse, medium to low-budget films that are box office successes. This project explores the centrality of the multiplex in fostering this ‘new wave’ in Indian popular cinema, with special reference to the ‘multiplex film’. The thesis argues that exhibition space influences cinematic form and shapes audience experience, as the phenomenology of the exhibition space articulates with elements of film aesthetics to immerse audiences in new modes of cinema-going. Indian multiplexes, embodying a symbolic break from the past, express a specific interior and exterior spatial dynamic. By relocating a middle class audience to this exclusionary space with its specific dynamic, multiplexes have attached the film experience to a particular audience demographic and organised a new production-distribution-exhibition logic, thus linking exhibition space to economic power and social status and connecting cinema-going to a specific social identity. The thesis argues that this influences the kind of films that are made to be exhibited in the multiplex. In this context, the multiplex space, in both its material and imaginative dimensions, becomes the interpretive framework through which to explore its cinematic narratives, where a consideration of both the material aspects of multiplex exhibition infrastructure and the experiential terrain of its spaces is used to interrogate the narrative and formal strategies that multiplex films employ to re-imagine the audience. The thesis claims that multiplex films can be located in this intersection where screen

aesthetics transect with the spatial dynamics and imaginative matrix of the multiplex space, thus organising a field of cinematographic experience that is concurrent with the new modernity of contemporary India.

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# 1

## **The Multiplex In India**

*That thing we call a place is the intersection of many changing forces passing through, whirling around, mixing, dissolving, and exploding in a fixed location. To write about a place is to acknowledge that phenomena often treated separately – ecology, democracy, culture, storytelling, urban design, individual life histories and collective endeavours – coexist. They coexist geographically, spatially, in place, and to understand a place is to engage with braided narratives and sui generis explorations.*

*– Rebecca Solnit, “Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness”*

The multiplex arrived in India in the middle of 1997, opening its doors to an audience that until then had only known single screen theatres. Anupam in Saket, New Delhi was remodeled and retrofitted to become PVR Anupam, India’s first multiplex theatre, made possible by an alliance between Priya Exhibitors Ltd. and Village Roadshow Ltd., an Australian multinational company that oversaw the formation of India’s first multiplex operator, PVR (Priya Village Roadshow Ltd.). Now in 2016, PVR Cinemas is India’s largest multiplex chain with 497 theatres across India; the rest of the market is shared between three other operators: Inox Leisure, Carnival Cinemas and Cinapolis (KPMG–FICCI Report 2016 100).

The multiplex is a place that is synonymous with modernity in contemporary India. It conjures an easy alignment with the global places of urban culture, connoting streamlined air-conditioned leisure and

consumption, at a distance from the heat and chaos of the city outside. It is this difference, a dissonance that it articulates within the previously interrelated geometries of the urban space, that marks out the multiplex. The dissonance it embodies is as much structural and architectural as it is cultural, financial and social. Even as it cuts into the viewing mechanics of cinema halls, creating the switch from single screen to multiple screens, analog to digital, single auditorium to multiple auditoriums, it also initiates a shift in the way that people go to the movies. In so doing, it has engineered a shift in the entire “psycho geography” (Bruno “Public Intimacy” 40) of the spectatorial itinerary. Cinema-going now takes place within a different set of material conditions, and traversing them involves a negotiation of the spaces of a different exhibition site. It is a new terrain, where layout, lighting, décor and sound come together to constitute a specific “spectatorial architectonics” (30) of cinematic exhibition. This incites an engagement that is both physical and psychological for the multiplex spectator, moving as she does through choreographed spaces designed with a specific intent. It activates a new sequence of impressions and views, and a new kind of engagement takes form in the experience of this architectural exploration – in the play of light and glass, in the lines of movement of stairs and escalators, in the layers and depth of this space. Cinema-going becomes a narrative moulded by this space, its architectural topography binding itself to spectatorial life, setting off the multiplex spectator on a new itinerary, as she views, peruses, wanders about and finally settles into the plush environs of a darkened auditorium.

The screen too responds with a new imagination, integrated as it is into the spectator’s traversal of this new site. Screen narratives trace the imaginative pathways of a new spectatorial journey, a configuration of images and sounds coloured by the socio- spatial context of its screening. The multiplex frames the screen on its own terms, marking it as its own, binding it to its terrain and the imagination of those who traverse it. As a modernist vision in urban space, representing “a symbolic break from the past” (Athique and Hill 129), the multiplex’s particular mobilisation of its space is the

articulation of a new way of seeing. It presents a changed visual terrain that chimes with the expanse of social space, designed to offer a new perspective, and the screen, coopted into the architecture of change, is expressive of a similar variance. Energized by this new space, its changed interiors and audience demographics, technological innovation that encompasses production to exhibition technology, the new media network, and the distinct material and aesthetic impulses that arise from it, the filmic space pulsates with an imagination that is aligned with the social and cultural forces of a new modernity. It unfolds a new imaginative geography of cinema that bears the imprint of the urban geography its spectators traverse as part of the multiplex experience. Implicated in the vectors of the new spatial and imaginative itinerary of multiplex spectators, the cinema screen reinvents itself accordingly and projects a contemporaneity that signals a new way of being.

This thesis seeks to examine a selection of ‘multiplex films’ in order to trace the ways in which these films effect a configuration of a new imagination, from the vantage point of the new middle class audience of the multiplex. The multiplexing of India is a phenomenon in progress, and my intent has been to capture a snapshot of it at this moment in time, even as it mutates and spreads into new territories, expanding its address and effecting new hybridities. From the moment of its appearance in urban space in 1997, the multiplex has been an architectural marker of a globalizing India, and hence of a new modernity, and continues to remain so in the present. Arjun Appadurai defines modernity as “a vision, a conception, or a project”, distinct from the contemporary which he describes as “a condition characterised by...linkage, propinquity, and flow” (“Illusion of Permanence”). In considering the newness or contemporaneity of conditions like the spread of mass media, market ideology or technology, Appadurai observes that while they certainly arise out of a causal flow between different elements, such as between technology, production and ideology, each of these elements also comprise “layers of circulatory systems in their own right, and also at a global level” (“Illusion of Permanence”). They thus come into existence as “structured interactions” between

elements as well as arising out of the dynamics of the individual layers of each element. The contemporary situation is thus “an inescapable condition” constitutive of these vertical and lateral flows of forces, “in which lots of actors and societies find themselves”. Modernity appears therefore “not as a stage or an epoch but as a vision or a project...with a particular set of characteristics”, arising out of the particular contemporary condition of globalisation (“Illusion of Permanence”).

The multiplex and its screen as an element of modernity in globalizing India comes to exist in a particular confluence of flows of architectural design, economic conditions, social grouping, technological innovation and cinematic storytelling. It has been born out of the individual global circulatory paths of each of these elements as well as the “structured interactions” between them. It thus becomes part of the modernist project of the reconfiguration of the city space, designed and sustained as a purposely-created set of spatial relations. Entry to this space incites a connection to the global spaces of urban culture and a sense of participation in the transformations of a post-liberalisation economy. Appadurai observes that the production, maintenance, distribution and enjoyment of physical spaces are conscious acts on the part of “social actors”, as “physical spaces are part of the material that individuals work from, draw on...highlight, sharpen, consciously use” (“Illusion of Permanence”). The spatial logic of the multiplex engages its patrons in an itinerary of the imagination reaching into multiple forms and possibilities – “to walk through its doors is to pass into an other India, continuous with the smooth spaces of global capitalism” (Gopal 133). The nature of the traversal of the physical space of the multiplex plays out in the traversal of cinematic space too, inciting a similar journey, the screen being a structural extension of this entire experiential terrain.

Hence the screen as an integral entity moored within the physical place of the multiplex informs my exploration of the multiplex films in this thesis, as I consider that both the material space of the multiplex and the experience of its screens constitute intersecting terrains. Together, they constitute an “intertextual terrain of passage carrying its own representations in the thread of its fabric...” (Bruno

“Public Intimacy” 39). In this passage from space to screen, “the interface between the exhibition wall and the film screen...is thus both reversible and reciprocal”, as “[t]he stories...on the...screen, and on the space that surrounds it, are there to be retraversed by the filmgoer” (34). Appadurai defines the “production of locality” as an effort which involves “the work of the imagination as social practice”, and which gives form to spatiality in such consciously produced physical spaces. Locality “form[s] part of the condition of its production, and...also form[s] an important part of the object of that production” (“Illusion of Permanence”). Thus the collective imaginative effort which births and reproduces and sustains the multiplex is also integral to the experiencing of its physical and screen spaces. It is the same imaginative effort which engages the inner self and effects a connection of “the topographic to the personal”, setting off the “the passionate voyage of the imagination” (Bruno “Public Intimacy” 24). The multiplex film is thus an integral experience of its place – its images and stories rise out of the particular social, economic and cultural vectors of a multiplexed imagination, and the related spectatorial experience informs and is informed by the place of its birth.

### **A History of Film Exhibition in India**

Athique and Hill observe that even though India’s first multiplex only appeared in 1997, the story of the multiplex, which is part of the industrial history of film exhibition in India, has been a century in the making (2). Ninety years separates the opening of the first permanent cinema hall in India in 1907, the Elphinstone Picture Palace in Calcutta, and the 1997 opening of the multiplex PVR Anupam in Delhi, but the timing of the birth of these two exhibition spaces has interesting parallels. Apart from driving the Indian film industry both financially and aesthetically, film exhibition also architecturally embodies the political and cultural changes influencing the mobilisation of public space in urban India. The first cinema halls, commonly known as ‘film theatres’ or ‘picture palaces,’ were constructed in the European-dominated business districts, against the backdrop of a burgeoning freedom movement against colonial occupation, and amidst “a very public contest for the metropolitan spaces of an India

already in the throes of urbanisation and political change” (Athique and Hill 24). Built initially with the primary objective of entertaining the colonial elite, it soon had to accommodate a more socially diverse audience as filmed entertainment became increasingly popular with the masses, expanding the market for film exhibition. So film theatres continued to be built, despite the active discouragement of the colonial government, which was fearful of the implications of huge crowds of working-class men gathering for film shows in the city centres (24).

The Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee (1927-28), an extensive and in-depth account of the early years of the film industry, states that the “Indian territory” for film exhibition extended to include Burma and Ceylon, with “key cities” of Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon and to a lesser extent Colombo holding the first exhibitions of released films because of their importance from the point of view of trade and also because they yielded the biggest returns (18). The report details how the number of “permanent working cinema-houses”, all concentrated in the provincial capitals and towns of British India, increased from 148 in 1921 to 309 in 1928 (with Bombay leading the list with 77), highlighting the fact that the cinema-houses of cities and large provincial towns differed according to the region, the locality and the class of cinema. The latter refers to the two types of picture-houses – one that exclusively showed “Western films” catering to Europeans, Anglo-Indians and educated Indians, and the other which catered wholly to native Indian audiences, showing a mix of “Western” and Indian films (19-20). With rural areas being serviced by travelling cinemas to a small extent, the hub of activity was concentrated in the cities and large provincial towns, where theatre chains like Madan Theatres Ltd. and Globe Theatres Ltd. controlled the exhibition sector, importing and exhibiting American, British and European films (20-21). Madan Theatres also exhibited and distributed their own as well as other Indian productions (21). Until the worldwide economic crisis brought about its collapse between 1931 and 1933, Madan Theatres Ltd. was the largest exhibitor, starting off initially with the establishment of the Elphinstone Picture Palace in Calcutta in 1907, and

subsequently expanding to operate 126 theatres from Lahore to Ceylon, Rangoon and Singapore (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 64-67). Madan Theatres' collapse had far-reaching ramifications for film exhibition in India, as its demise led to the rise of independent entrepreneurs controlling the business of film exhibition – a development critical to the political and cultural economy of Indian cinema for years to come.

The post-independence context in India saw cities undergoing radical changes, with a population shift taxing their residential capacities. While educated Indians were “relocating to occupy previously European districts and managerial occupations”, two waves of urban migrations were taking place, one comprising of Partition refugees of all classes and the other wider migration from rural areas and small towns into major cities, especially in the north of the country (Athique and Hill 30). This exerted a lot of pressure on the existing urban infrastructure of cities and contributed to the growth of shanty towns and encroachment of public spaces by the newly arrived settlers (30). Such pressures were compounded by the fact that post-colonial urban planning was sidelined in favour of industrialisation and development of rural areas (29). This all led to a crisis in urban infrastructure in the early post-colonial days, fuelled by the “lack of regulatory authority” on the part of municipal bodies in major cities and the dependence of the newly formed states on the economic plans of the centre in areas like urban management (29). The government did eventually wake up to the need for urban development programmes to meet the increasing demand for urban interventions, and systems were put in place whereby the urban environment was co-managed between local, state and central bodies (30). But this influx of a large number of migrants to the cities from rural areas “had an important bearing upon the composition of the movie audience in the early post-colonial period” (30). A lack of personal and public space for the new migrants, a dearth of other entertainment choices, the availability of cinema as an affordable pastime combined with the lack of sufficient number of theatres relative to the size of the population meant that a diverse population gathered under the same roof to watch a film (30).

Theatres continued to remain in short supply, as from 1948-56 the Indian government mandated a moratorium on the construction of non-essential buildings, which included cinema halls, because of the short supply of building materials (Dutta par. 21). But even after the government lifted the ban and relaxed licensing regulations, exhibition circuits did not expand “because shortage of cinemas was in the interest of the stronger, better-organised, and better-financed sector of the industry...(as) since the 1930s scarcity of venues had enabled theatre-owners to demand higher and higher shares of the box-office” (Vitali 199). Vitali also points to the existence of peripheral venues in addition to the central venues, the former screening low-budget action films for the lower end of the market and the latter exhibiting costly melodramas favoured by the middle classes (202). These peripheral venues and their exhibited of action films ensured a fast turnover, making capital circulate faster compared to the costly melodramas of the central venues favoured by the middle classes. While the melodramas ensured a larger market share for both peripheral and central venues, their production took a longer time and did not ensure a fast turnover of capital (202).

The expansion of the exhibition sector took off with the nationalisation of banks in the 1970s, as large amounts of capital became available and as Vitali points out, exhibitors figured out how to grow “without altering the terms by which they secured accumulation of surplus and their dominant position in the market” (201). Thus, between 1973 and 1974 nearly 517 new cinemas opened, bringing the total number of cinemas in India to 5304 (Dharap qtd by Vitali 201). With this also began a concerted effort to re-integrate the audiences of the two circuits by fashioning a narrative that combined physical action with melodramatic ingredients giving birth to the action films of the 70s (Vitali 203). Athique and Hill, however, are of the opinion that the vigilante action films of the 70s were the result of the “deepening sense of crisis” brought on by the “erosion of consensual politics”, the Naxalite peasant uprisings of 1971, the war with Pakistan, rapid population growth, and the imposition of Emergency from 1975 to 1977 (34). A crowded urban landscape, slow rate of growth and increased regulation

leading to the disaffection of large segments of the urban population impacted the cinema of the period, as evidenced in the condition of cities like Calcutta, which unable to handle the pressures on its infrastructure, witnessed a breakdown of its civic order (34). In this crowded urban landscape, the cinema hall came to be dominated by young men of the urban underclass, and the cinema adjusted its themes accordingly, reflecting the frustrations of this strata “suffering from urban overcrowding and economic stagnation” (36-37). But for the middle class, this “proletarianisation of the movie audience, the politicization of subaltern groups...exacerbated their extant anxieties...about the cinema hall” (36). The 70s cinema, geared towards the dominant demographic of large single screen theatres, displayed an overriding preoccupation with the concerns of the working classes. While the social and political atmosphere of the time prompted the appearance of the action films, the “generic restructuring” of the earlier predominant melodramatic fare was also driven by the economic logic of the largest audience demographic and the financial power that sought to define the new terms by which films competed to occupy popular cinema’s base ground (Vitali 206). Confined to the balcony sections of single screen theatres and outnumbered within the precincts of large single screen theatres, the middle classes were enfolded into an economic configuration whose narrative strategies were addressed to its most profit-yielding, working class addressee (206).

### **The Liberalisation Era and the Multiplex**

In July 1991, the Indian government embarked on a policy of liberalization that sought to leave behind the Nehruvian socialist framework of the Indian economy and open itself out to the forces of a global free market. Nehruvian socialism can be said to be a *mélange* of governmental ideologies that incorporated parliamentary democracy with socialist-inspired five-year economic plans to drive a regulated industrialization and mechanization of the feudal-agrarian countryside, wield state control over macro-economic formations and systematize a licensed and protected private sector supported by public monetary institutions (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 23-24). This economic model, thought of as

ideal for a newly independent post-colonial India, was cobbled into shape in 1951 with the launch of the first five-year plan, and by the 1970s India had emerged as one of the most heavily regulated economies of the world (Kotwal, Ramaswami, Wadhwa 1152).

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 that brought in large-scale reforms included measures that were taken towards freeing up the domestic economy from state control, abolishing import licensing tariffs, encouraging foreign direct investment and portfolio investment by the state, and facilitating the entry of private companies into the core infrastructural sectors like power, telecommunications, mining and roads (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 28-29). The reforms awakened a sluggish Indian economy, skyrocketing the growth rate of gross domestic product (GDP), which rose from 3.5 percent per annum for twenty years prior to 1980 to 6 percent in the 1990s, reaching as high as 8 percent in 2010. (Kotwal, Ramaswami, Wadhwa 1152-53). This larger policy of privatization was also accompanied by a media deregulation that saw the co-opting of the Indian media space into the global network of satellite communications and electronic information. Radio, television, and the Internet grew exponentially to cater to a vast and hungry audience. Indian cinema, too, riding the crest of liberalisation, witnessed a growing internationalization of its production and distribution channels, buoyed by a rising export sector and various multi-media forms of distribution and exhibition, combined with hugely successful spin-offs in music, fashion and advertising across websites and live events and shows.

All these contributed to “a new economic logic for film exhibition that made the multiplex cinema a viable proposition in India” (Athique and Hill 39). The multiplex boom that jumpstarted with the opening of PVR Anupam in 1997 continues to this day, securing for itself unprecedented influence “in the wider story of Indian business and public culture” (2). The success of PVR Anupam prompted other multiplexes to pop up in the major metropolitan cities of India, with leading business houses jumping on to this profitable sector and expanding into production, distribution and exhibition, in an

attempt to revive a model of structural integration long after the demise of Madan Theatres in the 1930s. Now in 2016, nineteen years after the opening of PVR Anupam, the Indian exhibition sector is dominated by four key players – PVR Cinemas, INOX Leisure, Carnival Cinemas and Cinepolis – who control 1469 multiplex screens between them (See Table 1 below). Technological evolution and innovation has become a growth driver for the exhibition industry, such as the expansion of online ticketing platforms (from 6 percent in 2006 to 32 percent in 2015), and the adoption of newer technologies like “high-tech motion seats which are synchronised with the on-screen action to heighten audience emotion”, called 4DX, and Dolby Atmos’ immersive audio and laser projection (KPMG–FICCI Report 2016 100).

<b>SNAPSHOT OF KEY MULTIPLEX PLAYERS</b>	
Multiplex Chains	No. Of Screens
PVR Cinemas	497
INOX Leisure	416
Carnival Cinemas	341
Cinepolis	215

Table 1. Key Multiplex Players in India, 2015 Source: KPMG-FICCI Report, 2016

As the multiplex expands and innovates and upgrades itself with the latest technology, the single screen theatres continue to fall in number. In the major metropolitan cities of India, most single screen theatres today stand like ghosts of their former selves, with peeling walls, fraying seats, wall-mounted fans and a dated projection and sound system. Winding staircases and foyers lead out from the insides to the entrances outside, which more often than not adjoin pavements, with box offices tucked away to their sides. Once, when blockbusters ran to packed houses in these theatres, ticket queues spilled out

onto the pavements and snaked round the buildings. Giant hand-painted posters and cut-outs loomed over and across their façades, the matinee idols in them larger than life figures. Prior to established show times, the box offices and the extended area around them would buzz with activity, with vendors selling street food, tea and cigarettes, and touts would be selling tickets at 'black' rates. Now no longer running to capacity and in varying states of neglect, these single screen theatres still stand, bearing names like Metro, Roxy, or Empire or names of Greek, Roman and Hindu gods and goddesses like Minerva, Apollo, Urvashi and Apsara or just ordinary names like Naaz, Anuradha and Rupasree. Their presence extends to the areas surrounding them, their names having morphed into the names of the surrounding neighbourhoods, the surfaces of their structures proclaiming a time that has passed.

According to statistics made available by the Film Federation of India, which conducted a census in 2010, the number of single screen theatres has dwindled to 10,167 from 13,000 over the past five years. In the space of a single year in 2010, more than 1000 single screen theatres downed their shutters because of compounding losses (FFI). The KPMG-FICCI Report of 2016 notes that in the Indian state of West Bengal over a hundred single screen theatres have shut down over the last one and a half years (107). Thus as multiplex chains expand and spread outside the major metropolitan cities and into smaller towns and cities across the country, the highly fragmented and unorganized sector of the single screen theatre registers a steady decline. Multiplexes have been aided in their rapid upward spiral by tax exemptions from the government, supply of real estate, growth in the film industry, favourable demographics and rising income levels of the urban Indian family. Their mushrooming across urban India has impacted the film industry, the audience and the city in a profound way, effecting changes whose reverberations are being felt not only in the trajectory of Indian cinema, but also across the urban landscape, with far-reaching social, economic and cultural implications.

With the multiplex assuming dominance, key changes were introduced in the production, distribution and exhibition sectors which have been growth drivers for the industry. The Indian production sector

consists of indigenous production houses like Yash Raj Films, Zee Entertainment Enterprises and Eros International; foreign studios like Disney India, Viacom 18 Motion Pictures and Fox Star; and many independent film producers. The entry of foreign studios has brought increased sophistication to the industry through greater emphasis on pre-production processes like content development and audience research, and stricter financial discipline like regular audits, and innovative marketing and distribution strategies (FICCI-KPMG Report 2012, 69). Production houses have started exerting more authority and control over budget and content for big-budget films, even as they also continue to source quality smaller-budget films from independent producers and, in spite of an entrenched star system in Bollywood, have extended their patronage to a host of bankable actors who often helm these small- and medium-budget films (69). But studios are also shifting from acquisitions to developing their own in-house content (KPMG–FICCI Report 2016, 96). In fact, content development has become the new buzzword in the industry, as the box office returns in 2015 favoured films with strong storylines (with or without A-listed actors), while other films crashed at the box office despite having A-list actors (104). This pursuit of bankable content has spurred initiatives like the Drishyam-Sundance Screenwriters Lab (a collaboration between an independent film production company and Sundance Institute), strategic alliances of big corporate studios with boutique production companies, and the emphasis on building franchises, where previous successes can be leveraged towards gaining more footfalls in cinema halls (97).

The stakes in distribution have correspondingly risen higher with more aggressive marketing strategies and promotional campaigns. Traditional distribution territories have been redrawn with large producers now preferring to deal on a specific state or city basis, intent on maximizing cash flows through widespread releases for both big and medium-budget films (FICCI-KPMG Report 2012, 70). And the rapid digitisation of film screens across the country is enabling wider releases of films in the first week itself, translating to increasing box office revenues, as almost 60-80 percent of theatrical

revenues are collected in the first week itself (FICCI-KPMG 2015, 70). Thus as the single screen rapidly loses ground, the multiplex is transforming film exhibition in India, dominating major metropolitan cities and now extending their sway into smaller towns and cities.

### **The Design Model of the Indian Multiplex**

Indian multiplexes, all chrome, steel and glass, are either built over reclaimed urban spaces, which previously housed assorted shops and buildings or slum settlements, or are located in the new suburban areas, which were once peri-urban farming villages but have now transformed into modern townships consisting of clusters of gated communities and shopping malls (Athique and Hill 129). Architecturally, the multiplexes – whether as a standalone structure, or embedded in shopping malls – articulate a dynamic intervention into the Indian urban space, their smooth, clean modernist lines, in sharp contrast to the urban sprawl around them, echoing similar urban structures across the Western world. Their distinctive structures enclose a clean, shiny, hermetic space, built on several levels and often connected by perpetually gliding escalators, linking department stores, restaurants, food courts, gaming arcades and multiple screening theatres. Often incorporating an atrium as a design element, integrating natural light into its enclosed climate-controlled space, the mall-multiplex keeps the street outside at a distance, recreating instead a sanitized miniature version of an idealized city space for its patrons. It is a presence and a structure within which a particular social space is contained – the glass-fronted doors of multiplexes like PVR, Inox, and Big Cinemas, names heavy with connotations of the new ‘globalised’ India, serving as a gateway to an *other* India. It is a space discontinuous from the environment outside, insulated and cocooned from the heat, dust and crowds of urban India, its presence taking on added levels of signification beyond that of an exhibition space, mediating the meaning of modernity to the gazes of the nation.

Athique and Hill observe that the multiplex belongs to a group of structures whose “distinctive

architectural styles associated with the contemporary period are closely linked to buildings with very specific purposes” (129). Indeed, their angular chrome and glass mark a specific intervention into urban space and articulate a “symbolic break from the past”, insistently demarcating the old from the new (129). Calling them “habitats for the New Economy that have re-deployed the panoptic architectures of global commerce within an Indian context”, Athique and Hill observe that they are not just ultra-modern cinemas, but “are inextricably part of the broader post-liberalisation trend of re-branding urban space in India”, their transnational structures serving as “a physical reference point for the aspirational goals of the new consuming class” (129).

The multiplex came to India at a time when the middle class had abandoned going to the theatres. As India entered a period of economic and political crisis in the 1970s, with the slow unraveling of the Nehruvian economic paradigm and then the Emergency, which curtailed the civil and political rights of citizens, middle-class cinemagoers reflected the anxiety and unease of the zeitgeist by staying away from the cinemas (36). With the growth of television ownership and the advent of the VCR during the 1980s, this status quo continued, with the middle class finding it safer to retreat to the comfort of their homes, leaving the public spaces to the urban underclass. The unveiling of the mall-multiplex in this scenario – the middle class version of an idealized city space, with its technologically state-of-the-art digital screenings, surround sound, plush seating and sophisticated air conditioning – facilitated the desire for a space where class tensions were expunged and a different set of behavioral guidelines held sway. Imbued with this appeal to class difference, the multiplex sets up a material and symbolic world that remodels everything that is consumed within, from the food in the concession stands to the filmic narratives on its screens.

The multiplex is thus consciously positioned as an exclusive, futuristic space for a privileged class, a mixed-use environment where a range of commodity-experiences is made available to the shopper-spectator. Athique and Hill mention cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, Delhi, Ahmedabad and Mumbai

where the newly built malls, multiplexes, office towers and residential apartments – all symbols of the New Economy – architecturally express a conscious opposition to their immediate environs and the built history of the cities in which they are located (132). Architectures of liberalisation, they provide spaces where the “financial, economic, cultural, discursive, as well as spatial and architectural manifestations of globalization overlap” (King 135). The mall-multiplex in particular, the fulcrum of consumer-driven leisure activity of the privileged class, has become a standard reference point for assessing the capability of an Indian city in achieving a global standard. With international architects brought in to design them in conformity to a global template, their transnational architectural design, while reflective of the hybridised taste culture of contemporary urban India, is also indicative of cultural and architectural shifts occurring on a global level (Athique and Hill 130). In an interesting argument, Athique and Hill situate the multiplex as the latest in the long line of architectures which mark India’s engagement with a broader international trajectory that subsequently shaped India’s perceptions of modernity, from the design of the colonial bungalow through Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh to Lutyen’s New Delhi to the multiplex (130).

Multiplexes in India are patterned along the “shopping mall” model as developed and prevalent in the West. They all fall within the standard template of global multiplex design, although India’s multiplexes display an aesthetic that is noticeably bolder and more colourful than their Western counterparts (134). David Mesbur, one of the principal partners of the Toronto-based firm *Mesbur+Smith*, who have designed over 450 multiplexes in more than thirty countries, including many commissioned for India by Wave Cinemas, asserts that, regardless of regional and cultural differences, there are fundamental design principles that go into the overall design concept of a multiplex theatre – from lobby planning to auditorium design to acoustic considerations and overall interior design (Mesbur 10-11). Even though regional variations exist (in terms of the theme of the décor, the food and beverages menu, the mix of auditorium sizes, or the exhibitors’ operational preferences) the

multiplex design adheres to the overarching principle of maximizing the synergy between the different aspects of its multi-use environment for maximum efficiency and profitability – fitting in features like high-visibility exterior signage, raked seating, acoustically treated wall surfaces and ceilings, and well-designed lobby spaces for easy dispersal of people from the ticket counters to the food counters and retail shops (10-11).

The interiors of India's multiplexes are their focal points, their unique selling propositions, because it is this "stimulating and fantastical world for leisure and consumption, an arcadia beyond the humdrum experience of daily life" (Athique and Hill 134) that their clientele pays to access. The glass-fronted sliding doors and the ubiquitous metal detectors manned by security guards and 'lady searchers' who frisk ladies' handbags lead into the spacious lobbies offering high-end franchised outlets for food, beverage and other consumer goods. The lobbies, which Athique and Hill describe as "scenes of visual performance in their own right" (134), have a distinctive, eclectic design which informs everything from the American-style food and beverage counters to the common spaces including the box office, lounge areas, restrooms and corridors. Mesbur talks of "fun, drama and fantasy expressed through the creative use of colour, materials and architectural motifs" as fundamental principles of multiplex lobby design, thematically expressed in a consistent way "from the entrance through to the auditorium details, and reflect(ing) local tastes, owner's preferences, the audience profile, and the type of films exhibited" (10-11). But notwithstanding the "cultural differences, preferences, tastes and climactic factors", which Mesbur acknowledges "give each locale a distinct character and style" (10), multiplexes from Mexico to Mumbai, symptomatic of the locational dynamics of today's globalized world, display interesting juxtapositions and appropriations of design styles. While the *Mesbur+Smith* designed lobby at the 14-screen Mundo 'E' multiplex in Mexico City "is themed in a 1890's Parisian style" (10), the firm's projects in India display a dominant post-modern design ethic as seen in the lobbies of their Wave multiplexes. For instance, their multiplex lobbies in the non-metropolitan

smaller Indian cities of Haridwar and Meerut, places steeped in a rich historical and architectural tradition that dates back to the pre-colonial era, showcase a décor style that is eclectic and extravagant. The bold colours, abstract wall décor, funky lighting and sculptured chairs all impart a vibe that is young, hip and playful – a postmodern design aesthetic that pointedly breaks away from the surrounding past, architecturally and otherwise.

In this breaking away from the past, the multiplex lobby materially represents the globalized present as the patron steps into an expansive glass-walled space with silent air conditioning and piped music. The concessions stand is staffed by courteous and well-groomed English-speaking boys and girls; the food and beverages menu – carrying everything from pizzas, burgers, samosas, nachos to colas and coffee – is diverse enough to satisfy cosmopolitan tastes; the play areas for children are fun and stimulating; the restrooms are hygienic; and the lounge areas offer comfortable, relaxing spaces. Food, within the standardized set up of the multiplex concessions stand, ends up being an integral part of the ‘multiplex experience’, an indicator of a certain cultural specificity within the sameness of the globalised experience. Just as the concessions stand in Mundo ‘E’ in Mexico City sells popcorn with salsa, guacamole and lime juice toppings (10), Indian multiplexes too are diversifying from the standard fare of cola, popcorn, burgers and french fries to include typical Indian fast foods in their menus (Patel). It is the same popular fast food peddled by street vendors outside single screen cinemas that has now gained entry into the multiplex lobby through slick packaging and a steeper price tag, a metaphorical packaging of the old into the shinier, pricier new.

Entry to the Indian multiplex’s “contemporary phantasmagoria” – to borrow Anne Friedberg’s evocative term describing the modern-day Western mall (113) – is possible only through its highly controlled access points, which, while keeping undesirable elements at bay, also add value to what lies within. This in turn increases the value of that access, reinforcing “the perception that the experience on offer is a socially exclusive and desirable privilege” (Athique and Hill 135). Thus this ordered,

homogenized space for the Indian urban middle class, transnational in style and aspirational in essence, creates boundaries and reinforces the distance between the leisure environment within and the city outside. Its spacious and decorated interior imparts a sense of safety, ease and exclusivity, freeing it from the class anxieties pervasive in the city space outside.

Configured for comfort and not capacity, multiplex auditoriums, smaller in size than in the traditional single screen theatres, come with plush seating arrangements, optional food and beverage delivery right to the seats, wall-to-wall carpeting, air conditioning with back-up generators installed, all topped up with the latest projection and sound equipment. Some multiplexes offer more expensive seating at the back – like for instance, the Gold Class section at PVR Cinemas, which offers wider and more luxurious leather reclining seats and a personalized food and beverages menu among other facilities – but unlike the balcony class of the single screen, they are not spatially separated by any boundary. Veering away from the standard 12-3-6-9 time schedule as prevalent in the single screen theatres, multiplexes also create mixed schedules for their different screens, accommodating films of varying lengths in their menu. The screened entertainment offers an array of choices in Hindi films, both mainstream and alternative, along with the latest Hollywood blockbusters. The multiplex menu accordingly reveals the comfortable co-existence of mainstream Bollywood releases and Hollywood blockbusters along with an assortment of alternative films, and niche films that previously would not have been exhibited at any of the distribution tiers (190-210).

In aligning with and extending the transformation of India's urban milieu within a consumerist framework, the multiplex is re-visioning the Indian urban landscape in a sizeable way, steadily making inroads into India's smaller towns and cities, its distinctive architecture serving to reshape the existing skyline in a more definitive way (134). Architecturally disruptive, possibly transitional it may be, but the Indian multiplex is assertive and insistent at the same time, its visual exclusivity announced in very definite terms.

## **Multiplex Screen Narratives**

This thesis reads a selection of contemporary multiplex films that exemplify how the narratives of the multiplex are energized by an imagination that arises out of the particular vectors of the multiplex. The multiplex was born from and is sustained by a certain confluence of socioeconomic factors, arising out of the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the consequent shift towards a more Western-inspired consumer society. The narratives on its screens are galvanized by a similar impulse, distinguishing them from the traditions and practices of the single screen. The omnibus masala action film of the single screen has given way to a thematic and aesthetic shift in the multiplex film, as it diversifies into a wide range of forms and styles, embracing an array of genres. In fact, they represent a different ethos and a new desire, a longing for transformation and an embracing of the new, the unknown and the unfamiliar. On multiplex screens, new heroes appear, the old is remade, new locations are explored, and the screen itself is remediated and reconfigured by the imaginative energy of a new digital media. These are the thematic veins which structure each of the chapters in this thesis and inform my reading of the films selected in those chapters. Two intersecting aspects are dominant in my discussion of the multiplex film: spectatorial experience and space, both physical and imagined. The symbiotic relationship between the multiplex and its audience means that any discussion of the former involves the latter and vice versa. The multiplex's space is animated by the presence of its patrons and their engagement with it, and for the audience the multiplex denotes a place synonymous with the places of global urban culture, evoking a distinct sensation and guiding behaviors. The multiplex screen is thus energized by its location within this matrix of intersecting and complementary orders, and the configuration of its images reflect the new imaginative horizons of its audience.

I thus argue for a situated, spatial and material account of the multiplex, on one hand, and demonstrate its effects on film through a textual and symbolic analysis on the other. The spatial analysis of the multiplex is established through a descriptive account of both environmental settings and experiential

interior. The sequence of film studies proceeds through a primarily narratological analysis that picks various aspects of psychoanalytic spectatorship, sensory affect and symbolic register. The combining of the two methodologies rests on the fact that any analysis of visual media is embedded in the lived context of its occurrence. My analysis of multiplex films is effected within the social and cultural context of ideas and experiences of the physical space of the multiplex. Space, broadly speaking, thus serves as an interpretive framework for the analysis of film. Athique and Hill hold the multiplex responsible for “audiencing”, that is, for trying to shape its audience by employing “socio-economic filtering, architectural dispersion and ideological diffusion that...imply a profound psychological effect upon patrons” (165). The multiplex screen is cognizant of this, and I explore the ways it unfolds a cultural landscape conceived in a specific arrangement of aesthetic and material elements that encompass a range of storytelling practices and deployment of new technologies in the service of its particular audience.

As an architectural expression of modernity for contemporary India, the multiplex is still an unfolding phenomenon in the Indian urban space, as it expands into the rest of urban India. Single screen theatres are still operating, although their numbers are rapidly declining with the spread of the multiplex. The census taken in 2010 by the Film Federation of India puts their number at 10,137 (FFI), while a more recent evaluation puts their number at 8,500 (Bhattacharya). Among the functional single screens, there are those that have been pushed to the periphery, screening C-circuit films for a low class audience (Kumar), but there are also those which have managed to still retain relevance in the multiplex-dominated distribution network. In fact, in the present scenario of an expanded cinematic menu of the multiplex, which sees the incorporation of masala action films in its fare, the box office value of single screens is also being taken into account. Currently, multiplexes bring in 65% of the box office while the single screens contribute the rest of the 35% (Bhattacharya). But even though single screen theatres show mainstream releases, a disjunction is at work in the exhibition sector, whereby

single screens and multiplexes are demarcated as separate ‘circuits’, with separate audiences. The multiplex with its metropolitan middle class demographic is presumed to have a different taste culture than the largely working class single screen demographic, and so films with themes or storylines that can be traced back to masala aesthetics of the old single screens are deemed more suitable and hence more profitable in the single screen circuit. I discuss two films in Chapter 4 from the vantage point of this circuit phenomenon, but the huge success of action films in recent years makes the situation somewhat more complex. In the battle for the box office, distributors are focused on getting the maximum number of screens for their releases, whether multiplex or single screen. A recent case in point are the two films, *Dilwale/ Braveheart*, a superstar vehicle with masala elements, and *Bajirao Mastani*, an opulent melodramatic period drama, which were both released on 18 December 2015. An intense tussle ensued for both multiplex and single screens as distributors for *Bajirao Mastani* had entered into a prior agreement with single screen exhibitors which effectively blocked *Dilwale* from being screened in single screen theatres of the big urban centres (Bhattacharya). In the battle of the screens, this meant that *Bajirao Mastani* trumped *Dilwale*, as more screens meant more footfalls and consequently more revenues. Thus while the number of single screen theatres are dwindling, the remaining ones are still seen as valuable additions to the total screen count, especially in the case of big superstar-helmed masala action releases.

While states like Punjab has no more surviving single screen theatres (Bhattacharya), in West Bengal over a hundred single screen theatres have shut down over the last one and a half years (KPMG-FICCI 2016). Single screen theatres which are still operating try to stay in the market by upgrading their projection and sound equipment and renovating their interiors. Renovation of single screen theatres work in two ways – one is the acquisition and retrofitting of single screen theatres by multiplex chains which turn them into multiplexes or high-end cineplexes like PVR Plaza in Delhi. The other is when single screen owners renovate and upgrade their facilities and equipment in the hope of attracting a

middle class audience and staying in the distribution network. The difference is that in the former the single screen theatre is co-opted into the multiplex network, while in the latter the single screen theatre still retains its individual identity as a single screen theatre.

Chapter 2 of this thesis traces the history of the Indian (Hindi) popular film from the social film of the post-Independence period to the present day multiplex film. The history of popular film from the social to the masala to the multiplex film is one that is interlinked with the history of the cinema hall, its locational dynamics and spatial layout and the socioeconomic and political conditions that influenced those conditions. The emergence of the term “Bollywood” after the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 marked a turning point in the history of popular cinema. It signified the transformation of popular cinema as a “central cultural referent” around which a global constellation of cultural spin-offs like music, events and other audio-visual entertainment gathered – “Bollywood” coming to signify the supplementary culture industry which has grown around the actual film production. This transformation paved the way for the emergence of multiplex films, a development which combined middle class formation with a consumerist ethos, crystallising the influence of market forces that were set in motion with the emergence of “Bollywood” at the start of the 90s. This chapter presents an overview of the diverse opinions that inform the emergence of the term “Bollywood” for Indian popular cinema, together with a selection of the varied framing processes that constitute its study.

Chapter 3 attempts to capture the current period in the spread of the multiplex beyond the major metropolitan centres of India. Guwahati is a non-metropolitan second-tier city in northeast India, in which the multiplex has made a recent entry. This chapter makes a comparative exploration of three cinema halls in Guwahati – two single screen theatres, Rupasree and Anuradha and one multiplex, Fun Cinemas – and their distinct cinematic experiences. Along with other structures of the post-liberalisation economy, Fun Cinemas’ entry has effected a radical restructuring of the city space,

shifting its commercial centre and marginalizing the old parts of the town. The architectural intervention of the multiplex is not merely structural but social and cultural as well, as it invests economic power and social exclusivity to a consolidated middle class demographic within the city space. In this chapter, an exploration of the three sites not only bring out the shifting contours of modernity that their structures display but also explicates the city's growth, its directional flow and its increasing spatial complexity through their particular locations. Further, the contrasting experience of each site also brings out the ways the cinematic intersects with exhibition infrastructure, and the particular ways it is organised and expressed with particular effects for different audience demographics.

Chapter 4 delves into a detailed comparative analysis of the narratives of the single screen and those of the multiplex. Even though multiplexes dominate the exhibition sector, and the number of single screens is rapidly dwindling, the ones still running service a large section of the non-multiplex-going audience. While the distribution structure is largely geared towards the multiplexes, distributors have not completely abandoned the still functioning single screens, with action and masala blockbusters being released across both multiplexes and single screens. This chapter proceeds from the premise, however, that both the multiplex and the single screen are considered separate 'circuits' with different demographics and consequently a different taste culture. An analysis of two films, *Nautanki Saala* (2013) and *Commando* (2013), released on the same day but targeted at different box office demographics, makes clear that both films carry the consciousness of their exhibition space in their very structure. This chapter explores how in these two distinct sites of public viewing, apart from the narrative differences between the two films, the phenomenology of the exhibition space is implicated in the formal arrangement of their respective texts.

Chapter 5 examines the multiplex cinema's current proclivity for remakes as a phenomenon. A close reading of *Don: The Chase Begins Again* (2006) and *Khoobsurat/Beautiful* (2011), two remakes of old

single screen hits, reveals how by using memory as a strategic tool to rethink and reprise the original, the remake reconfigures the old into the new in order to address the desires of its urban middle class audience. In addressing a new audience, the film remake thus stands as a counterpart to that other architectural remaking, that of retrofitting old single screen theatres into modern single screen or multi screen theatres. Just as the remake reshapes itself, breaking away from the past and unfolding itself on the new screens, the retrofitted hall too remakes and resituates itself in a new context in the new urban middle class imagination. The film remake and the retrofitted hall thus become indexical of the contemporary cultural landscape, each embodying in their reconfiguration a transformation into a 'desired' product of the middle class imagination.

Chapter 6 explores the contemporary representation of landscapes on multiplex screens. The multiplex as a space is entwined with the narrative of post-liberalisation urban transformation and its spaces exude this desire for a makeover by recreating themselves in the image of the global urban spaces of the western world. The screen too is charged with this desire of a new geographical imagination for an 'elsewhere', and the two films in this chapter, *Shanghai* (2012) and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara/You Only Live Once* (2011), frame and narrativize their landscapes to unfold this desire for the elsewhere in contrasting ways. The elsewhere of both films, whether Shanghai or Spain, are heterotopic spaces, opening up a spatial imaginary on screen that enables us to see where "we" are not, giving visibility to one's self. Though a place with geographical markers, it is still a construct of the imagination, straddling both the real and the virtual, its locatedness in reality fuelling its potency as a topography of the mind. But while *Shanghai's* elsewhere waits in the periphery, not yet arrived at, fraught with the anxiety of the globalizing world, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara's* landscape is a tangible reality, gliding into the matrix of the smooth transnational spaces inhabited by the multiplexed imagination. In both films, apart from their contextual meaning within the narrative structure, the locations acquire the ability to transcend the narrative frame and articulate this urban imagination of an 'elsewhere' through

the prism of their landscapes.

Chapter 7 explores the intrusion of new forms of digital media onto multiplex screen narratives and their influence in crafting a new cinematic experience. A close reading of three films – *3G – A Killer Connection* (2013), *Table No. 21* (2013) and *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha / Love, Sex and Betrayal* (2010) – all of which integrate the various screens of the digital media into their narratives, explicates how the uptake of various forms of new media screens by the original filmic screen *de-isolates* it from the darkness of the auditorium and places it within the connected *screenscape* of contemporary life. Stylistically adapting to its narratives activities that are common for the screen-engaged multiplex spectator, these digital spaces are positioned at a juncture where they help explicate the many overlapping material and virtual spaces in urban middle class India, illuminating the multiplex screen in a mosaic of possibilities.

The multiplex and its films form an intersecting terrain where the psychology of architecture influences the cinematic landscape and consequently its spectatorial experience. Cinema is spatially moored to the cinema hall, and even though present-day digital technology makes its relocation to spaces other than the cinema hall possible, the primary intent of cinema production is the cinema hall, its exhibition implicated in a “publicness” (Rai) that informs its experience. In exploring how the particular spatial dynamics and imaginative matrix of the multiplex space inform its cinematic narratives, this thesis attempts to examine the link between cinematic form and exhibition practices, a burgeoning area in film studies which is yet to be fully explored in contemporary Indian cinema.

## 2

### **Tracing Popular Film**

#### A History of Popular Cinema, Emergence of 'Bollywood', and Multiplex Films

Until the entry of the multiplex, Indian cinema was traditionally geared towards delivering a complete entertainment package with action, comedy and romance, in what is popularly referred to as the 'all-India film', designed to appeal to the diverse demographics that make up the Indian film audience. The regional and linguistic diversity of the audience in the Indian subcontinent has meant that the Hindi film (by Hindi film or Indian popular film I refer to Indian mainstream commercial cinema in the Hindi language produced in Mumbai) – whose influence pervades every aspect of Indian life and is considered as the great signifier of the Indian political, cultural and social landscape – strives to integrate this diversity. It presents us with a shared sense of the past and the present, incorporating the serious, the comic, the spectacle, the action, in a sumptuous text that defies generic norms. Sangita Gopal observes that this traditional Hindi cinema gives way at the turn of the millennium to “a new cinematic order”, which she designates as “New Bollywood” (2). This trajectory through which New Bollywood arrives at this juncture from its traditional omnibus format is one that has always been influenced by a gamut of changes in the larger political and socioeconomic sphere, all of which

impacted the production-distribution-exhibition structure of the film industry.

Gopal traces New Bollywood's genealogy to the process of Bollywoodisation that came about within a specific socioeconomic condition created by the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the early 1990s:

The integration of the Indian economy into the global marketplace and the rise of an urban, consumerist middle class provided a suitable context for a wholesale restructuring of the movie industry and the emergence of radically novel styles of filmmaking. Thus even though New Bollywood cinema's genealogy goes back to a set of processes that had been at play for a while, it only begins to emerge as a distinctive product in the post-liberalisation era. (3)

Indeed, it was the opening up of the economy in the early 90s that incited the change in Indian popular cinema, as it stepped out into the larger global domain as "Bollywood". While for some it alluded to the inherent hybridity in popular cinema (Kaur and Sinha) for others this nomenclature served the purpose of "recentering Indian film culture around a new cluster of identifications" (Prasad "Surviving Bollywood" 44). In 2002, the "Indian Summer" of London unfolded in a celebration of "Bollywood" and its fashion, décor, music, dance, art, food – cultural referents which evoked the cinema or the memory of it, and along with it, also conjured an associative evocation of "Indianness" (Rajadhyaksha "The Bollywoodisation" 57). The Bollywood presence thus became embedded in an economy of consumption, serving the global nation well in economic terms (Vasudevan 339). Multiplex narratives, in effecting a "display of the multifaceted ethos of middle class life" within the structure of a generalised consumerist culture (Gopal 134-140), crystallises the effects of the market forces first unleashed with the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991. This chapter traces the arc of Indian popular cinema as it evolves from the social melodramas of the 50s to the masala action of the 70s, and through its metamorphosis during the 90s into "Bollywood" and contemporary multiplex films. It

also presents a selection of the varied frames of analysis that have been used by scholars in critically engaging with popular Indian cinema.

### **From 50s Social to 90s Bollywood**

Until the entry of the multiplex, it was the single screen staple, the all-India popular film that dominated the cinematic landscape, its omnibus nature designed to cater to a wide and differentiated audience. In post-independent India, the scarcity of public leisure space and the economic logic of film exhibition meant that the cinema hall had to accommodate people from all classes within its space. In addition to this compulsion of remaining commercially viable by catering to the largest audience possible, popular Hindi cinema was also shaped by the aspiration “to be a socially responsive national cinema, and to articulate the various currents of modernity” (Gopal 5). This “triple calling”, led to the development of the social film – “a master genre that subsumed romance, comedy, action and social drama” – that characterised all the films of this period from 1947 to 1970 (5). Drawing on multiple genres, a typical social film focused on one or more relevant “issues” and then embellished it with add-ons like rural vignettes, comedy routines, thrills, and song and dance sequences to pull in the masses (5).

The *masala* (literally meaning a mixture of spices) action replaced the social film in the early seventies, as a series of crises like war, economic recession, growing unemployment and political Emergency, challenged the “established aesthetic conventions and modes of production” of the film industry (Prasad 118). Gopal calls the *masala* “a much more entertainment-driven version of the social film” which “[w]ith its flashy aesthetics, tongue-in-cheek humour, and multiple star casting... was a formal reflex of the Bollywoodisation of Hindi film” (7). But the *masala* action films reflected a sense of alienation and disenchantment of the period, giving rise to “angry young men” heroes who were disillusioned and embittered by the system and embodied “a populist and violent individualism” (6).

These vigilante action films forever changed the course of Hindi cinema, its genre predominance and its concept of stardom, creating the phenomenon of Amitabh Bachchan, Hindi film's biggest superstar. But while the action films reflected a sense of dissatisfaction with the system, Valentina Vitali also spotlights the economic and commercial considerations of that period that generated their production. She traces their appearance to the expansion of the exhibition sector and the corresponding availability of production money as well as the consequent need to speed up its circulation (201-202).

Vitali points out that action films had disappeared as a distinct genre from the late 1940s onwards, as the social was the dominant genre of the 50s and 60s, running in the central exhibition venues favoured by the middle classes (119). However, she notes that "a particular kind of Hindi action film" emerged in the early 1960s, which concentrated on "the cinematic presentation of physical energy and its valorisation both as a narrative element and as a selling point" (134-144). Starring the dominant action star of the period, Dara Singh, these small-budget films were being made for the lower end of the market and exhibited in peripheral exhibition venues (134-180). But the changed socio-economic dynamics impelled a reconfiguration of the scenario containing the parallel existence of the action films, which had quicker turnover times, and the more expensive social melodramas, which had longer turnover times. In order to combine the audiences of both the central exhibition venues and the peripheral venues and to effect a quicker turnover of capital, there was what Vitali calls a "generic restructuring" of the action genre, by embellishing the action (which sold well at the lower end of the market) with expensive narrative ingredients to cater to that affluent section of the audience (202-203). Thus was born the *masala* action film of the 70s, its narrative strategies tailored by the new economic configuration and the way it imagined its ideal addressee (206).

By 1971, India was already the largest producer of motion pictures in the world. With the steady decline in the import of foreign films, courtesy of the expiry of the agreement between the Indian government and the Motion Picture Export Association of America, indigenous films continued to

grow (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 26). Moreover, the combined effects of the relaxation of licensing regulations, the nationalization of banks that made available a large amount of capital, the consequent expansion of the exhibition sector and censorship reforms, the film industry witnessed a dramatic rise in production (Vitali 199 – 201). This remarkable growth was achieved despite a weighty tax structure and the lack of state patronage. The ‘industrial’ legitimacy of cinema was still suspect in view of the unstable and shady world of film finance, and commercial cinema with its populist aesthetic did not seem deserving of a high priority in the immediate cultural agenda of post-Independence India (Vasudevan 7).

*Masala* action ruled the single screens throughout the 70s and the 80s. But this period also saw the birth of the state-supported arthouse cinema movement called ‘parallel cinema’. This “parallel” cinema movement, dependent on government financing and the patronage of the educated middle classes, was quite diverse – spanning the gamut from socially realistic films to more experimental fare (Gopal 7-8). But it petered out in the mid-eighties with the migration of socially relevant content to television, along with its middle class audience base (8). Hindi cinema entered a transitional phase during the period from 1980 to 1991 with the rise of the B-movies (9). Produced on shoestring budgets and exhibited at second-rung exhibition venues, the B-movie products – with their action films, women-centred revenge sagas, horror movies and the teen flick – could be considered a precursor to the genre diversity of the multiplex films (9).

The 80s and the 90s saw the video and television boom hit the commercial film industry, as in the rest of the world. The new economic policies facilitated the entry of television sets and video into middle class homes, forcing the commercial film industry to look for other avenues of growth. It found it in the audio cassette revolution, born out of the lucrative market for film songs, and in the growth of film-based television programming, which included feature film broadcasts and thematically arranged film scenes and song and dance sequences tailored to the television format, in addition to the gossip,

film review and celebrity talk shows. Together with the rise of these profitable spin-offs, the late eighties and nineties also saw the commercial film industry consolidating its overseas distribution markets in North America and Europe (primarily in the UK), in addition to its traditional strongholds in North Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia.

The 90s brought liberalisation of the Indian economy, and Indian cinema riding the crest of liberalization, began operating out of a new context. With the growing internationalization of its production and distribution channels and the resultant growth of its export market, commercial Indian cinema emerged as a “vehicle of Indian identity requirements” (Vasudevan 3) – mirroring the fluid negotiation of territorial and cultural boundaries by the global Indian in the wider domain of the globalized ‘multi-cultural’ space. The geographical fluidity gained by this section of the Indian population also paralleled the drift towards the reframing of the nation-state, even of the national imaginary, as a reworking of the inside/outside dichotomies of the nation (336). In this fashioning of a global nation, commercial Indian cinema in the 1990s found itself serving as a “central cultural referent” around which a global commodity constellation of radio, audio-visual entertainment, music, events, and shows gathered (Rajadhyaksha “The Bollywoodization” 55).

The renewed presence of film as a cultural referent, which went hand-in-hand with the overwhelming importance of lucrative cultural spin-offs, is what Rajadhyaksha refers to as “Bollywoodization of Indian cinema” (“The Bollywoodization”). This shift, besides generating a new space for multicultural engagements, also had ramifications for the narrative content of the commercial Indian film – as reflected in the organization of the storytelling, the settings and the varied musical attractions expressly designed with the diasporic audience in mind, an audience looking to accommodate identity conflicts in the “ornamentation, energy and performative excesses” of the popular Indian film (Vasudevan 338). As films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun /Who Am I To You* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhania*

*Le Jayenge /Brave of Heart Wins the Bride* (1995), *Dil To Pagal Hai /The Heart is Crazy* (1997),

*Pardes /Foreign Land* (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai /Something Happens* (1998), *Kal Ho Na Ho /Whether or Not There's a Tomorrow* (2004) broke box office records, it became clear how successfully the new Indian popular film had invested in the concept of the nation as brand. The drama of the extended family provided a generic format to incorporate the expanding world of newly available commodities, and new narratives of desire explored these, not only across territorial boundaries but also across other boundaries emerging for a freshly globalised nation engaged in identity tussles and triumphs (Vasudevan 338-39). Even the cinema of the diaspora like Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) and Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) invest in this "ornamental commodity universe" (338).

### **The "Bollywoodisation" of Indian Popular Cinema**

Discussions of new hybridities effected by contemporary popular Indian cinema in the context of the dynamics of a contemporary globalized media space evoke a wide spectrum of reactions, ranging from unease to an acknowledgement of the osmosis. Even as Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha talk of the "crossing of borders" (16) within the Bollywood text, Ashish Rajadhyaksha dismisses it as a "post-authentic phenomenon" ("The Bollywoodization" 62), Vijay Mishra terms it as an "artificial construct" (3) and Ravi Vasudevan sees it as an "ornamental commodity universe" divorced from an authentic national cinematic aesthetic (339).

The word "Bollywood" itself, a derivative from Hollywood, signals this process of hybridization. The origin of the term "Bollywood" is nebulous, with different people claiming first usage, but as Gopal says "the increasing use of *Bollywood* as the name for Hindi cinema...points to a very real process...[wherein] Hindi cinema becomes far more susceptible to the logic of capital, renounces its nation-building role, aspires to become mere "entertainment", and promiscuously embraces a range of foreign styles as it moves from a "nativist" to a globalised art form" (12). For Raminder Kaur and Ajay

J. Sinha, this hybrid term “Bollywood” indicates a “crossing of borders”, alluding to the inherently hybrid constituency of Bollywood yet also serving as an index of different senses of Indian identity, conveyor of “Indianness” to diverse audiences, while negotiating both Indianness and its transformation on a wider, diasporic platform. The interdynamic relationships between the local and the global, the national and the intra-national, finds expression in the ‘globalized intertexts’ of Bollywood, “made visible in specific narratives or deployed as visual and eroticized spectacles at specific cultural intersections in different parts of the world...” (16-17).

In his essay *Surviving Bollywood*, Madhava Prasad says that he finds *Bollywood* “a strange name, a hybrid, that seems to at once mock the thing it names and celebrates its difference” (41). He links the rise of the term *Bollywood* in the last decade or so to the way that Indian popular cinema has undergone some changes, displaying “a new aesthetic marked by consciousness of the global presence of Indians and Indian cinema”, producing “yet another variation of the nationalist ideology of tradition and modernity...relocat[ing] what we might call the seismic center of Indian national identity somewhere in Anglo-America” (44). In this transition to a new mode of self-relation, Prasad discerns new issues with language, audiences and, at the economic level, the local variations in the logic of commodification. He notes that Bollywood’s significance lies not in its strictly denotative function, but in its success at “recentering Indian film culture around a new cluster of identifications” (44).

Prasad also discerns in this nomenclature an attempt at reorienting or repositioning Indian popular cinema within the context of a global sphere. Prasad states that “Bollywood” signals “the advent of a certain reflexivity...recognizing its own unique position in the world, the contrastive pleasures and values that it represents vis-à-vis Hollywood...enabl[ing] the Hindi film to reproduce itself for a market that demands its perpetuation as a source of cultural identity...” (50). But Prasad doesn’t hesitate to point out that this successful commodification of Indian cinema as “Bollywood”, serves not only as the aesthetic of the spatially Other, but also a revisitation of the Hollywood of the past, as most

of the thematic elements in Indian cinema are variants of the ones popularized by stage melodrama in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe (49).

Ashish Rajadhyaksha finds a distinction between Indian cinema and the more generalized relatively recent Bollywood culture industry. He observes that the “Bollywoodization” of Indian cinema is related to the articulation of a “freer form of civilizational belonging explicitly delinked from the political rights of citizenship”; it is the export of Indian nationalism itself, “commodified and globalized into a ‘feel good’ version of ‘our culture’ ...the divide of *democracy* versus *modernity*, now playing itself out on a wider, more surreal canvas than ever before” (“The Bollywoodization” 37). Rajadhyaksha calls “Bollywoodization” a “politicized, pro-hybridity cultural ‘mongrelization’” of Indian cinema (borrowing Salman Rushdie’s word used in another context), suggesting that this cultural phenomenon is inherently *inauthentic*. He observes that Bollywood as a product of globalization is “an excellent repudiation of authenticity”: it is “a post-authenticity phenomenon...also explicitly *post*-postcolonial, its eventual destiny postmodernism, inaugurating a term that has unprecedentedly scant regard for the credibility that has historically been a central criterion of ethnic value” (*Indian Cinema* 62). He would rather have the term “Bollywood” refer to a reasonably specific narrative, a mode of presentation, and a mode of production – a way of producing culture within a national and global context that is inextricably linked to the Indian nation-state and the postcolonial economy of liberalization, and not just restricted solely to cinema but informing a range of products and practices (17).

Ravi Vasudevan suggests that Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s test of ‘authenticity’ for Bollywood is problematic because the criteria of what constitutes indigenous authenticity have changed between the 1950s and the present, and ‘indigenism’ of story and production was something that much of Indian cinema laid claim to from the time of D.G. Phalke, when he made the first Indian talkie *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. He also argues against Madhava Prasad’s contention that Bollywood has

brought the social genre or family film into a position of symbolic and disciplinary ascendancy, observing that the cinema emerging from the contemporary entertainment and image business spectrum is not yoked to one narrative or institutional architecture. Rather, “ [it] is varied in its genre structures, much more so than ever before, and this is intimately related to corporatization and its bid to create differentiated products” (341-346).

Vasudevan believes that the filmic dimension of film studies – the analysis of the film form, storytelling practices, and even on-screen performance cultures – seems to have been lost in the current academic trend of trying to understand the political economy and sociology of the cinema institution. He suggests that an understanding of popular cinema can come from the analysis of the strategies of narrative form. A study of popular cinema’s own storytelling methods and narrative logics, its modes of address, its deployment of cultural imagery in character construction and song sequences, the traditional idioms and protocols associated with visual and lyric practices, socially defined representations and spectator address, and the codes of individuated perspective (point-of-view shots and continuity cutting in the mode of Hollywood cinema) can give us an informed understanding of the complex, hybrid dimensions of Indian popular cinema (67-68).

### **Framing Indian Popular Cinema**

A multiplicity of opinions thus informs the hybridity debate in the context of contemporary Indian popular cinema as a site of fusion or interpenetration of geographically distinct cultures. The study of Indian cinema “as an important ‘national popular’ domain has negotiated various transitions and conflicts in the sociocultural and political fabric of India for over a century now” (Kavoori and Punathambekar 2). In “juxtaposing readings of films’ narrative and representational strategies with the sociocultural and political context within which they were produced, circulated, and debated, these studies help us understand how cinema mediates ideas regarding nation, gender, caste, class,

community, and sexuality” (3). Over the past decade, focused attention on a range of filmic and extra-filmic sites with varied theoretical lenses has helped to augment this body of scholarship further (3). Social psychologist Ashis Nandy and Vinay Lal observe, albeit tongue-in-cheek, that Indian popular cinema is high in current academic fashion, attracting the attention of post-modernists and post-structuralists. But they also admit that this attraction has helped crystallize a new disciplinary area in the region – a conglomeration of post-modernist or post-structuralist schools of thought and theories of post-coloniality, powered by the changing cultural politics in South Asia (xiv).

Ashis Nandy sees the global, the unitary and the homogenizing find a place in popular cinema, but in terms of a principle of plurality grounded in traditions – a multi-layered affair with the global mass culture, effected through an indigenously forged cultural sieve, which itself takes strange new forms as a result, subverting mass culture even while seemingly adapting to it passively. This assessment of Hindi cinema’s peculiar hybrid nature as a symptom of protest and resilience against an alien culture of modernization has Jyotika Virdi commenting that “if such a view – specific to the postcolonial situation – reveals resistance to imperial pressure on the one hand, it is culpable for ‘indigenous chauvinism’ on the other” (4).

Virdi situates her study of Indian popular cinema at the intersection of postcolonial theory and cultural studies, inquiring into the new social movements of class, race, gender and sexuality, forging an interdisciplinary arena with overlapping methodologies drawn from anthropology, communication, history, literature and sociology. But she acknowledges that cultural theories used to study western texts do not deal with the complexities of decolonization, a process that marks the form and content of Indian cultural texts, and, in the era of multinational corporations and financial oligopolies, the term “postcolonial” becomes emptied of real significance as new forms of imperial control replace old ones. Nevertheless, she subsumes her study of Hindi cinema within postcolonial studies because of other concerns central to its discourse, and the postmodernist interrogation of binary divisions informs her

search “for the links between the enduring private elements of family, marriage and heterosexuality, the accompanying discourses on masculinity/femininity, and the public discourse of nationalism” (7).

Virdi believes that “an osmosis did occur in Indian cultural forms, creating new hybrids” (17). She sees popular Hindi cinema as a sort of a register where the dynamics of class, community, politics and the complex interaction between gender and sexuality are played out in seemingly simple narratives – allowing the critic to grasp at “a nonlinear discursive social history mapped through repetitive themes, narratives, conflicts, resolutions, and evasions that at different moments reveal gradual social reconfigurations – or a sharp break with what went before” (17). Though careful to steer clear of what she calls “reactive indigenism”, she is disparaging of the term “Bollywood”, calling it an “awkward misnomer...weighed with innuendos” (21).

Ashish Rajadhyaksha proposes a move from a classificatory genre theory – where cinema is classified as melodrama, thriller, action, comedy, romance or mythology – to that of a cinematic mode of production for understanding Indian cinema, helping to draw out the role of “signifying practices” (a term he borrows from Janet Staiger’s work on Hollywood cinema) which fashion and inform it (*Indian Cinema* 39). This is echoed in Madhava Prasad’s effort to incorporate such “signifying practices” into a mode of cinematic production that dramatizes the transformative scale of what might be involved in bringing such a concept to India’s cinemas. For Prasad, the “haphazard and individualized mode of production” of Indian popular cinema, mirroring Marx’s concept of ‘heterogeneous form of manufacture’, makes the “component elements of the text arise in traditions that have a separate existence or...(like the star system) acquire and independence that retroactively determines the form of the text” (*Ideology of the Hindi Film* 48).

For Rajadhyaksha, a combination of “textual, economic, structural and cultural conditions” makes up an effective practice of film studies. He suggests that it consists in exploring the interlocking process

its textual structures claim to govern and in examining the sustained local reproduction of such a process that mediate the global comprehension of the “assimilation of Hollywood by India’s major popular cinemas at various levels, from those of genre to those of production outsourcing” (*Indian Cinema* 17). He terms this assimilation as the “Hollywood Mode”, defining it as distinct from American cinema, as the “Hollywood Mode” involves “a specific set of narrative, production and exhibition systems...an elaborately conceived master text including duration and performance style, camera-shooting techniques, editing and sound-recording and mixing conventions...and eventually even to projection conditions” (14-15). This “embattled assimilation”, in the context of Indian cinema, is maybe no more than “one of the forms the internationalization of the cinema takes” (17).

Nandy and Lal make an astute point that popular cinema in India has “increasingly tended to become a battleground of cultures, tastes, aesthetics, and political ideologies” (xiv). They note the overt dichotomy in the fact that while commercial Hindi cinema remains a window to popular India’s English-speaking, globalized intelligentsia, it is also a cinema that is often *perceived* as flawed by the canons of global film theory and almost entirely disjunctive with the globally dominant aesthetics and concept of good cinema. Their prescription to correct the imbalances in contemporary film studies of Indian popular cinema is to “shift the emphasis from the thematic concerns, cinematic language and style – as they are understood or interpreted by conventional film theory – to the varied reactions and exegetic manoeuvres of the audience...(and) to opt for frames of analysis and models of interpretation closer to the viewers” (xv – xvi).

Nandy and Lal’s desire for different aesthetic frames of analysis for the “carnavalesque atmosphere, centrifugal story-line, the larger-than-life characters” of Indian popular cinema (xiii) seems to find expression in Anustup Basu’s concept of “assemblages” or “narrative compacts”, in Amit Rai’s concept of “media assemblages” arising out of concentric circles of “media connectivities”, or even in Ashish Rajadhyaksha’s “cinema effects” in the visual attributes and narrative presentation of the

Indian popular film. Basu defines “assemblages” as “energetic, diffuse, but practical combinations of statements, bodies, sounds, events, matter, spaces, knowledges, beliefs, or subjective stances that come together and disperse constantly, in an opportune manner, without being organized into, or even appealing to, stable diagrams of human subjectivity and consciousness” (12). Basu grants this cinematic assemblage of the popular Indian film, this combination and juxtaposition of “memories and phenomena of different orientations”, this “unfettered energy of cinematic figuration” the status of autonomy without labeling it as an “alternate” hybrid entity (16). This assemblage, he suggests, is capable of cutting across a world of variables, “overriding the centralizing economies of the modern – namely authorial/subjective narration – and a metalinguistic grammar of plausibility, broadly called realism” (16). Basu posits that this assembling principle has always been paramount in the classic Hindi film, and in the globalizing electronic media ecology of contemporary India, this assembling principle thrives by just “inventing a new syntax for the times” – “a fresh cinematic style [that] uproot[s] styles from sites of ‘tradition’ and institutions of the modern, render[s] them afloat, and sets them into a complex concert” (6).

Amit Rai also talks of a globalizing “media assemblage” in the context of Bollywood or contemporary Indian popular cinema. Rai’s concept of “media assemblages”, culled from a variety of sources from feminist and queer philosophy to biopolitical cultural criticism, consists of what he calls “a continuous movement (or qualitative multiplicity) of audiovisual information across a population as a contagion” (6). It embodies sensations through repetitive practices, enfolding the essentially open totality of cinema, “a constantly shape-shifting, vigorously reorganizing body-machine becoming newly global and differently informational” (70). It is the “publicness of cinema” that fascinates him, and the way cinemagoers are continuously implicated in new functional “media connectivities” and “(de)territorializing interfaces” of new digital media – from the Internet to cellular phones, and satellite TV, or generative sensations between bodies and a graphical user interface (70).

Thus issues of authenticity and nationhood, of modernity and tradition, the contentious nomenclature of the term “Bollywood” itself are concerns that characterize the critical inquiry of Indian popular cinema. The differing frames of analysis that have been used to examine this cinema – as a specific mode of cinematic production practices, or as a complex and hybrid agglomeration of narrative practices, or even as a conglomeration of “media assemblages”(Rai) or “narrative compacts”(Basu) – all offer a range of vantage points to see how Indian popular cinema, fusing a range of diverse elements, arises out of particular sociocultural and political contexts and in turn mediates and relates to them.

### **Multiplex Films**

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 can be considered as the point in the trajectory of Indian popular cinema where the omnibus format of traditional narratives transmutes into “a new cinematic order” (Gopal) leading to the subsequent development of the genre multiplicity and diversity of multiplex narratives. With the rise of the new middle class, the recognition of industry status to film and the subsequent introduction of the multiplex in the late 90s, popular film found itself altered by new production, distribution and exhibition modes, new audiences, the demands of a global marketplace and alignment to a new culture industry, thus engendering wide ranging changes in the cinematic landscape. The Indian film industry had already begun its expansion in the overseas market right after the economic liberalisation of 1991 and continued during the rest of the decade, with overseas distribution rights for a big budget film roughly doubling in the returns from the Indian market. But the appearance of the first multiplex in 1997 and its subsequent mushrooming in the metropolitan cities introduced a new shift in the exhibition landscape. Multiplex theatres, targeted at the urban middle class with disposable income and with tickets priced higher than those of single screen theatres, started changing the economic logic of film exhibition. Middle class audiences found themselves readily swapping the “single commodity activity” (Athique and Hill 9) of the single screen

for the multi-media consumerist experience that a multiplex offered. From this point onwards, the multiplex set about radically changing the film exhibition business, and by extension, the cinematic menu on offer. Deliberately breaking away from the “homogeneity of the all-embracing format of the social film and the *masala*”, the films of the multiplex display a diversity and multiplicity of genres, emblematic of the social and cultural forces that constitute Indian modernity of the new millennium (Gopal 3). The films of the multiplex thus renders the world as a particular and distinctive effect of the intersecting trajectories of urbanisation, middle-class formation, consumerism and globalisation – all of which operate within the larger matrix of economic liberalisation. It replaces the large heterogenous audience of the single screen with a smaller exclusionary middle class one, “utilis[ing] a homogenising milieu to advertise a wide spectrum of products and subjectivities” (134).

Sangita Gopal classifies the multiplex films as first generation and second generation. The first generation, which she estimates spanning from 1995 to 2004 approximately, “reprises the phenomenology of the multiplex itself” in its formal inventiveness and genre diversity (135). The second generation, which came into being in the second half of the 2010’s with the proliferation of more multiplex theatres, less concerned with formal experimentation and focusing instead on the new sociology of the couple and characterised by the novel narrative technique of the “multiplot” (138). Gopal’s classification ties in neatly with the locational dynamics of multiplexes and their expansion. The first generation of multiplex films exhibited the insular exclusivity of the multiplex phenomenon itself, signaling a “decision to forego a comprehensive national public in favour of a middle class target audience that is securely enmeshed in the consumption economy” (137). Gopal observes how the very form of the first-generation multiplex film, characterised by “reckless genre-mixing and code-switching...novel uses of state-of-the-art technologies, and...the creation of a narrative and audiovisual style and sensations...anticipated the life-world of the emerging middle classes” (137). The aesthetic impulses of the multiplex film thus “characterised the transformations unleashed by

liberalisation”, symbolizing “the dream of development in which they were eagerly participating” (135).

The second generation reflected the spread of the multiplex itself in the widening of its modes of address, as new multiplexes mushroomed all over urban India, bringing in more audiences into its fold. While the first generation of multiplex films, geared to audiences in metropolitan cities, displayed decidedly urban themes, a western sensibility and a formal inventiveness, the second generation, targeting the burgeoning middle classes in larger urban India, sought to stitch together “all the different fractions of the middle class together as a viewing public in such a manner that each retains its particularity even as it partakes of the ethos of a generalized consumerist culture” (140). One of the prevailing forms of this period, the multiplot movie, Gopal asserts, provided the perfect structural framework for “the simultaneous representation of multiple character types who together signify the middle class as a differentiated collective” (141). It reconstituted and contained the internally differentiated and rapidly expanding middle classes within its “overarching network structure”, its “narratives of adjacency” reflecting the spatial logic of the multiplex itself. In fact, Gopal points out that the consonance between the architectural imagination of the multiplex and its cinematic forms is unmistakable, with the first generation reprising the phenomenology of the multiplex in its “kinetic forms” in their “frantic and frenetic representation of the new”, while the second generation’s “network narratives” replicate the spatial logic of the multiple screens of the multiplex (139-141).

As the multiplex now expands and spreads to more areas of the country, the cinematic menu seems to have adopted an even more expansive address to include even wider sections of the audience. The cinematic menu now includes updated versions of earlier masala action films, along with the usual multiplex categories of middle class comedies and low-budget indies. The phenomenon of the masala action blockbusters started with *Dabangg (Audacious)* in September 2010, followed by *Bodyguard* and *Singham* in 2011. The record-breaking success of more action films in 2012 – *Ek Tha Tiger (Once*

*there was a Tiger*), *Dabangg 2*, and *Rowdy Rathore* – all of which ended up at the top of the box office heap with collections of USD 20 million and more (FICCI-KPMG 2013, 67) – continued onwards with *Kick* (2014), *Singham Returns* (2014), *Gunday/Outlaws* (2014), *Bajrangi Bhaijaan/Bajrangi Brother* (2015) and *Baahubali* (2015), all of which were major blockbusters at the box office.

While these blockbusters signal a changing scenario in the multiplex menu driven by the expansion of the exhibition sector and its consequent impact on the distribution sector, there is a rising category of films whose distinct presence is being felt in the current cinematic landscape. A range of nomenclatures has been forwarded to categorise this class of films that have been performing well at the multiplex box office – “new age mainstream”, “balcony films”, “underdog films”, “middle cinema”, “midstream cinema”, “offbeat commercial”. Most of these taxonomies hint at the middle ground that the multiplex must now find in order to consolidate both its original core metropolitan crowd and the larger urban audience to which it is expanding its reach in the towns and cities beyond the metropolitan centres. The suggestion of “balcony film” is interesting as it actually positions the multiplex audience within a specific spectatorial lineage – that of the middle class balcony audience of old single screen theatres, making explicit the fact about the multiplex remains an exclusively middle class formation. Nandini Ramnath, a critic, observes:

This sizeable chunk of moviegoers comprises the children and grandchildren of the patrons of the middle cinema of...the 1980s. The narratives of middle cinema were set mostly in the cities and in the same economic bracket from which its viewers hailed. This was the class of filmgoers that would watch new releases in the balcony section of single screen cinemas.

(Ramnath)

The other suggested nomenclatures also hint at the positioning of itself that the multiplex must now effect to attract and retain its audiences. While terms like “midstream cinema” and “middle cinema”

are self-explanatory, other suggestions like “offbeat commercial” or “new age mainstream”, with their oxymoronic element, reveal the ongoing negotiations between two sets of locationally diverse audiences with different tastes – the metropolitan crowd with more exposure to Hollywood fare, and the larger urban crowd in the rest of India inclined to a more elevated emotional register of traditional popular cinema.

Thus while the ‘multiplot’ of what Gopal has termed second generation multiplex films strove to bring together a differentiated and expanding middle class under an overarching network structure with its “network narratives” (Gopal 141), the “midstream cinema” or “middle cinema”, a phenomenon which becomes noticeable in 2016, leaves behind the adjacency of “network narratives” and strives for an unabridged whole where multiplex sensibilities are sutured to a single screen spirit. It would not be inappropriate thus to mark 2016 as the beginning of the third generation of multiplex films because the appearance of “middle cinema” or “midstream cinema” at the multiplex box office has become noticeable. We see strong plotlines and themes driven by realistic performances and settings, which nonetheless carry a distinct emotional register to appeal to Indian sensibilities, even as the melodrama is tempered by the overall Hollywood-inspired aesthetics of the films. In tracing a wider arc than its original first or even second generation avatars, the multiplex has to collate the taste preferences of a wide section of the multiplex demographic, and arrive at an integration that moderates and blends an elevated emotional register with a Hollywood-influenced realism and dramatic structure.

In exploring the films of the multiplex, the period I focus on is roughly from 2010 to 2014. In this period, action blockbusters were making a comeback and the “midstream cinema” or “middle cinema” had not yet become a pronounced or burgeoning phenomenon. In this period, while big-budget superstar-helmed action films were scoring hits at the box office, the medium-budget ‘multiplex film’ also featured prominently in the cinematic menu, arising out of the particular socioeconomic configuration of the multiplex itself and energised by its architectural imagination. My frame of

analysis of the multiplex films is the multiplex space itself, a space both material and psychological, animating both screen and spectatorial experience with its own particular terms. I thus use space as the overarching framework to examine the multiplex film and its narrative strategies, its particular arrangement of aesthetic and material elements, its thematic and stylistic choices. The spatial framework works to locate the genre-diverse multiplex film within the purely architectural dynamics of the multiplex space as well as to situate it within its imaginative matrix. I concur with Vasudevan's assertion that the exploration of genre-diverse contemporary cinema cannot be "yoked to one narrative or institutional architecture" (341) but must rather be derived from the analysis of film form and storytelling practices of contemporary popular cinema. But situating the exploration of cinematic narratives within the spatial and imaginative context of the multiplex helps to explicate more clearly "the contemporary entertainment and image business spectrum" (341) out of which this cinema appears, and how its exhibition is implicated in the "publicness" of its experience (Rai 70).

Athique and Hill's study of the Indian multiplex and Gopal's interrogation of multiplex films are two works which inform my study of the multiplex and its narratives. Athique and Hill's detailed account of the multiplex is accomplished by situating it within the historical trajectory of the Indian cinematic exhibition space and the current social, political and economic context of its existence. The study takes into account the architectural novelty of the multiplex in the contemporary Indian urban space and explicates the close connection between the multiplex and its urban middle class audience. Athique and Hill's study, together with Gopal's categorisation of multiplex films into a first and a second generation linked to the locational dynamics of the multiplex, become the foundation for a more intensive study of the aesthetic psychology of the multiplex space and its screen narratives, while also helping to articulate how the post-2010 shift into the next generation of multiplex films is tied to the multiplex's entry into smaller towns and cities.

### 3

#### **Rupasree, Anuradha, Fun Cinemas**

##### *A Comparative Analysis of Three Cinematic Exhibition Sites of Guwahati City*

The cinema hall, though not exclusively an urban phenomenon, predominantly exists within the changing cultural politics of the urban landscape, intertwined with the various components that comprise urban life. It exists within and is organised through the “cultural, social, technical, environmental and political complexities, and relational possibilities” of the urban space (Ewing 100). Modern cities are continuously fluid and shifting places, “always susceptible to erasure or brought into different relations with emerging structures” (Hay 226) and the cinema hall’s structural evolution, technical upgrading or spatial relocation evolves out of and is tied to this geography of concurrent relations and meanings. In the American context, James Hay observes that “by the 1930s, the place of cinema had become inextricable from a broad (re-)configuration of urban space, its leisure space, public and private space, civil and governmental space, class and neighbourhood space, gendered space”, making the “cinematic” and the city “overlapping, interdependent formations” (222-224). Describing the cinematic as “a dispersion of practices conditioning and conditioned by an environment” Hay cites examples of its interconnection with the city – the spread of the “cinematic”

into the home “reconstituting and realigning” its domicile, the reclaiming of older urban theatres and public spaces which then become part of urban renewal, and the developing of commercial centres, like the shopping mall multiplex cinema or on a grander scale, theme parks (224).

In India too, the cinematic and the city have grown into an intersecting formation, as the impact of government policies, urban planning and social stratification has impacted the growth and development of the urban landscape and in turn influenced the location, design, access, and audience demographic of cinematic exhibition sites. Colonial policies, urban migration, post-independence nationalization of banks, growth of video, advent of cable television, liberalisation of the economy – all these factors profoundly impacted the Indian cinema hall, its cinematic event and the nature of its experience, even as they concurrently changed and moulded the urban landscape. Hay considers cinema as having a “historical effectivity” in relation to urban space (222), and the cinema hall articulates this historicity in concrete terms, existing in an interconnected and overlapping formation within the urban landscape. From the Elphinstone Theatre in 1904 to PVR Priya in 1997, and continuing on to the present era of multiplex domination, we see how the arc of the growth of the film exhibition sector in India took shape within the changing spatial dynamics of the city and its economic and cultural politics. In its evolution from single screen to multiplex, the gamut of changes – ranging from theatre architecture, audience consolidation, cinematic form, distribution networks and modes of cinema going – echoed the shifts and realignments that the exhibition space effected in tandem with the urban environment. In linking itself to the larger space of the city and appropriating its own meanings, the cinema hall becomes a product of its transactions, standing in relation to places and events that form and transform the narrative of the city.

This chapter explores three different cinematic exhibition spaces in the second-tier city of Guwahati in northeast India. Located in different parts of the city, these three cinematic exhibition spaces – the two single screen theatres Rupasree and Anuradha and the new multiplex theatre, Fun Cinemas – are

markers of the city's growth and signifiers of its evolution. Inextricably linked to the historical, social and cultural life of the city, they are repositories of its cultural memory. While their varied architectural styles present the shifting contours of modernity and their separate locations indicate the directional flow and spread of the urban landscape, their differing levels of current visibility and prominence in urban civic life illustrate how the spatial reorganisation of the city is linked to a reorganisation of its social life.

### **The Cinema Hall in the City: The Cinematic and Urban Morphology**

Just as the opening of the Elphinstone Picture Palace ushered in the concept of *cinema going* in India, the multiplex, a sub-genre of the cinema house, has also brought in changes in contemporary cinematic exhibition in India, interweaving *cinema going* with the concept of being modern and being part of a specific leisure environment. It has in the process effected changes in the filmic landscape, and has become a crucial part in the reconfiguration of social spaces in urban India. When in 1997, Priya Exhibitors Ltd. joined with Village Roadshow Ltd., an Australian multinational company, to open India's first luxury multiplex cinema, PVR Anupam, in Saket, New Delhi, it set in motion a trend that has transformed exhibition spaces in Indian cities, and by extension, the city itself.

But unlike the single screen theatres of the old, the multiplex, though situated again within a contested urban landscape rife with the class anxieties and tensions of a 'globalising' India, does not mimic the spatial dynamics of the city outside, but instead obliterates those tensions and transforms it into a homogenized space by giving access to a specific privileged social group with the economic power to buy that access. It offers up a diverse cinematic menu, in line with the hybridised taste of metropolitan India, for its audience, who are accommodated in a seating layout that is purged of boundaries and class differentiation. In contrast to the single screen theatres, which reflect the class-tinged spatial dynamics of the city space in its interiors, the multiplex refuses to acknowledge that dynamic,

eliminating the reflection of a 'splintered' city space and homogenising its spatial layout. Going to the multiplex entails walking into a world concomitant with a specific social identity, and being part of a screen experience that is diverse and choice-based. This *world* within the multiplex is both imaginary and material, composed of competing, complementary and overlapping symbolic and spatial orders, and it is in the intersections of these different discursively constructed worlds that a filmic landscape emerges on the multiplex screen, articulated with notions of a new modernity, constructed and represented in language, concepts, images and visual representations.

Thus a conglomeration of spaces, metaphorical and material, makes up the cinematic exhibition space, and the cinema hall, both single screen or multiplex, becomes a product and a space of transitions and transactions, developing intimate ties to the city, negotiated and traversed by a corpus of spectators and imbued with the particularities of spectatorial life of the time. Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* observes how "the spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it" (38) Lefebvre's contention that space is socially produced, that cultural and economic determinants structure social space and are also structured by it, holds true in understanding the significance of the cinema hall as a public space in India – in its capacity to articulate modernity, influence class formation and re-order public space. The multiplex and the single screen articulate two differing *practices* of space – the curved art deco structures of the single screen theatres and the bold, angular lines of modern multiplexes, embody the contrast between the old and the new sites of film exhibition. They also signify the radical transformations-in-progress in the material fabric and everyday life of contemporary Indian cities, propelled by the liberalisation of the Indian economy.

The economic liberalisation of the mid 90s with its policies of deregulation and favouring of private and foreign investment led the way for a transition to a free market economy and with it, a remaking of the urban space. In the desire to align Indian cities in the image of global urban spaces, transnational

architecture began to make its appearance in the urban landscape. It was in the 1990s that “the idea of the new post-industrial globalised metropolis began to circulate” among the middle classes in India, deeply influenced by the post-industrial global image of what a city should be and look like (Chatterjee 144). The multiplex, appearing at this point, became part of this project of reconfiguration of the urban landscape. It also signaled a new economic logic for film exhibition, one that handed the middle classes the power to determine box office success of films. Accordingly, the cinema started to change with a return to themes favoured by the middle classes, this shift in the Indian cinematic landscape finding “a ready parallel in the contemporaneous remaking of urban space” (Athique and Hill 39). In this restructuring of urban space, Partha Chatterjee observes that,

Government policy, at the level of the states and even the municipalities, has been directly affected by the pressure to connect with the global economy and attract foreign investment. The result has been, on the one hand, greater assertion by organisations of middle class citizens of their right to unhindered access to public spaces and thoroughfares and to a clean and healthy environment...manufacturing industries are being moved out beyond the city limits; squatters and encroachers are being evicted; property and tenancy laws are being re-written to enable market forces to rapidly convert the congested and dilapidated sections of the old city into high-value commercial and residential districts. (144)

Metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad witnessed the first wave of reconfiguration as architectural interventions in the form of malls, multiplexes, shopping arcades, office towers, residential apartments, lifestyle and entertainment zones began to restructure the urban space. Bangalore has been often held up as the city that most allows “the liberalisation era to remake in its own image” (Athique and Hill 132). According to Chandravarkar, large-scale architectural changes of the post-colonial period took place in cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad (qtd. in Athique and Hill 132). Therefore cities like Bangalore and to an extent

Hyderabad, were more “amenable to an architectural blank slate”, and they were “singled out for transformation into New Economy cities”(132). Athique and Hill observe that “travellers arriving at Bangalore’s airport in 2007 were greeted with a series of banners that proclaimed Bangalore as a ‘city of malls’, ‘a city of multiplexes’, a ‘city of IT’ and a ‘city of the future’ (131). In fact, the consideration of multiplexes “as indicators of progress, development and modernity” (131), points to how the cinematic is intertwined with the changes in urban morphology. Multiplexes have come to signify that break from the past; they are the articulators of a new modernity that are in alignment with the global aspirations of contemporary urban India. In cities like Mumbai, real estate shortage compels multiplexes to be “parachuted” into demolished sites of earlier buildings where they “jostle for attention amongst the architectural expressions of the city’s commercial past” (132). This upsurge of reconstruction and reconfiguration in post-liberalisation India has changed the urban layouts in many cities, such as

Bangalore’s suburb of Koremangala and the satellite towns of NCR, (where) the concentration of malls, multiplexes, residential apartments and office towers express themselves in conscious opposition to the environs and the historical architectures of the cities from which they sprang. The impression that these developments seek to create is one of an exclusive and futuristic space of high activity, new technologies and ostentatious wealth. (132)

This wave of urban reconfiguration is now appearing in the second-tier cities of the country, engineering the same fragmentation and restructuring seen in the major metropolitan cities. The changes in these spaces have been more drastic and stark, as new architectures reshape skylines and change vistas. The multiplex has been an integral aspect of this restructuring, most times appearing at the vanguard of other structures of the New Economy, its distinctive architecture attracting attention and proclaiming the birth of the new. And as the multiplex expands and spreads beyond the major metropolitan centres and into smaller towns and cities, the cinema attunes itself to this shift, expanding

its address, incorporating *masala* and action elements in its cinematic fare and also exhibiting the beginnings of what is now being termed as “middle cinema”, a seamless blending of western storytelling aesthetics with Indian melodramatic elements. In fact, as second-tier cities undergo these changes, the government is directing attention towards their upgrade by unveiling the ‘Smart Cities’ project, to lessen the pressure on the urban infrastructure of major cities. This project will endeavor to transform 98 urban centres, mostly mid-sized cities and satellite towns of larger cities, into ‘smart cities’ – with better social infrastructure, efficient transportation, robust digital connectivity, e-governance, affordable housing and its ancillary facilities (Balachandran). The first phase of this scheme includes 20 cities, which includes the eastern cities of Guwahati and Bhubaneswar, the western cities of Pune, Sholapur, Surat and the southern coastal cities of Kochi, Coimbatore and Vishakhapatnam among others (The Hindu). Accounting for nearly 35% of the urban population, at a cost of USD 7.5 billion (Balachandran), the ‘Smart Cities’ project promises to radically transform the larger urban space beyond the metropolitan centres.

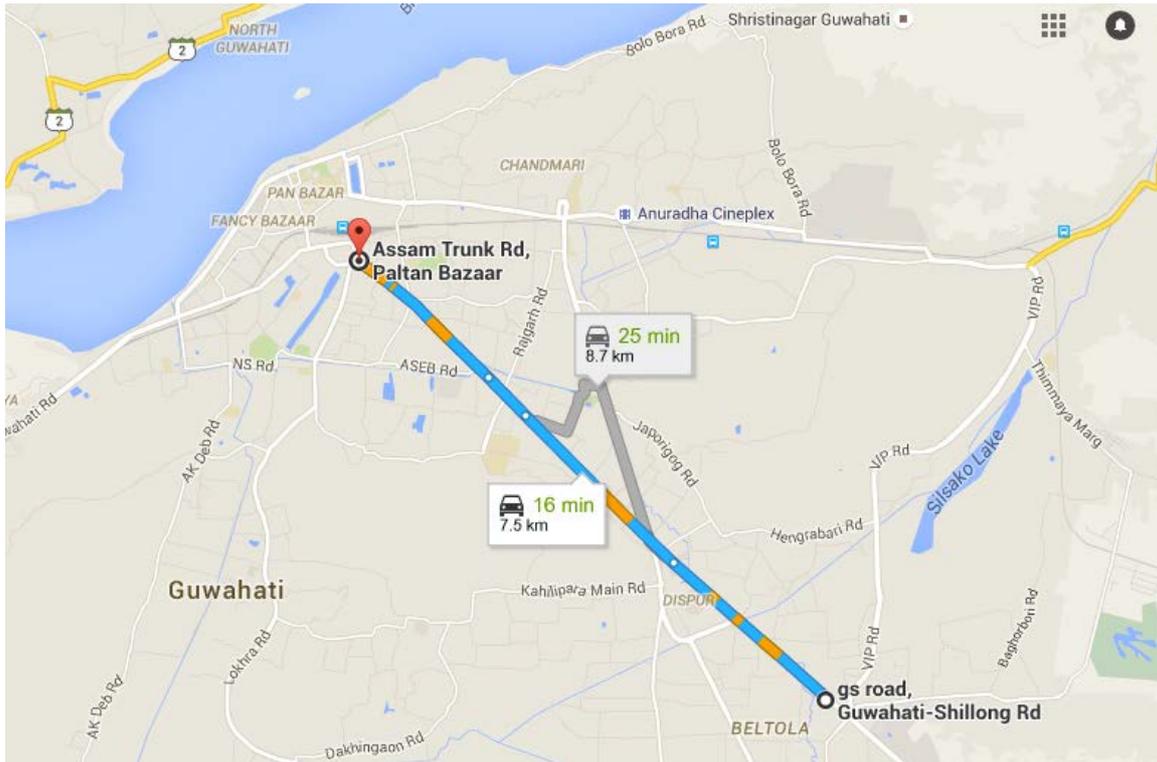


Fig. 1. Extension of A.T. Road to G. S. Road, Guwahati, Image Courtesy: Google Maps



Fig. 2. Cinema halls in Guwahati, Image Courtesy: Google Maps

## **Guwahati's A. T. Road to G. S. Road: A Geography of Centrality and Marginality**

Guwahati is a second-tier city, but also the largest city in northeastern India, and has now been selected to be included in the first phase of the 'Smart Cities' project. As a water city, located along the floodplains of the Brahmaputra river, Guwahati's original urban spread was shaped by this large water system. It bifurcated the city into the north bank and the south bank, with its original core commercial area in the south bank located close to the riverfront. Ethnic tensions have long simmered below the surface in this area of the country, reaching various flashpoints, but as the focal trading point between the northeast region and mainland India, the city has always had a geo-strategic importance. As sweeping economic, social and political changes alter the urban landscape across India, a process of accelerated change is also taking over Guwahati. A rapid population growth, exploding to its current figures of 957,352 according to the 2011 Census, has compelled the city to stretch west and south to accommodate its growing population. In this expansion, it is engineering a reconfiguration to align itself more in the image of the restructured metropolitan centres of India. The old commercial centre of Assam Trunk Road (henceforth referred to as A. T. Road) is sidelined as the city expands southwards towards the Guwahati Shillong Road (henceforth referred to as G. S. Road) and beyond. G. S. Road has now become the new commercial hub, the new site for its malls and multiplexes, its coffee, fast food and restaurant chains, together with its other commercial establishments. High rises continue to be built along the length of this road, as more office spaces, shopping malls and multiplexes spring up along its areas, with an exponential increase in the volume of vehicular traffic along its spacious four-lane road.

Thus as the city changes in scale, its urban fabric is also reconfigured and with it the nature of human experience vis-a-vis the city. As streets, shops, buildings and open spaces are redesigned in favour of a new logic of the urban geography, the city dweller also readjusts to the new spatiality, building new connections and associations in the experience of the city. What was once central is shifted to the

periphery, as a new central takes shape constituted by a new modernity. Appadurai's distinction of the term *modernity* from the term *contemporary* helps in understanding the present spatial, infrastructural, social and imaginative reconfiguration of a city like Guwahati. Appadurai defines *modernity* as a specific "vision, a conception, or a project", distinct from the *contemporary* which is a "condition characterised by linkage, propinquity and flow" ("Illusion of Permanence"). The nature of Guwahati's present expansion and urban realignment is not one of organic growth. Rather this growth has been induced by an abrupt architectural intervention that carves out a new territory in the image of the new urban spaces of global culture. Thus in organizing this new centrality, what present day Guwahati embodies is a new modernity, a specific post-liberalisation "project", rather than a contemporaneity arising out of a link to its past.

Classical urban geography delineates centrality as a site of increased attractiveness (Losch 1940, Isard 1956, Alonso 1964) while the social sciences discourse of human and business network theory (Bavelas 1948, 1950) defines it by its system characteristics, without its spatial implications (qtd. in Fuchs 138). Thus "central places are spaces where people are (or choose to be)...and "attractiveness is the capacity of an area to attract program or functions and ultimately people (obviously a circular causation)" (138). In Guwahati, A. T. Road and G. S. Road articulate this new geography of centrality and marginality, transforming the city in both spatial and imaginative terms. This new geography produces a new territorial polarization based on what Zygmant Bauman had termed the 'fluid modernity' of the high-speed networks of the new software era as opposed to the bulk-obsessed "heavy modernity" of the old (113-21). G. S. Road embodies the new central place, and with its shopping arcades, multiplexes, international fast food chains, restaurants, hotels, new business establishments signals the alignment of the city with the New Economy, its communication-enabled networked society and its consumption-centric focus. As the city expands, new roads branch out towards newer localities, arterial highways bypass the older areas, and the city extends out to create a

new suburbia. This spatial reorganisation of the old and the new has become central to the reorganisation of social life of the city, and it is within this arrangement that these places derive their identities.

The cinematic site, affected by the mutations of the city, is also entwined in this reconfiguration of urban space, operating within the diverse contexts of a new urbanity. Old and new exhibition sites are thus placed in different relational contexts with the new shapes and configurations of the urban space. Rupasree and Anuradha stand as old single screen theatres, lending their names to their neighbourhoods, while Fun Cinemas has appeared as one of the new multiplexes of the city, located within 'The Hub' shopping mall. Rupasree on A. T. Road is dilapidated and worn out, screening sleaze films for a low-class audience, while Anuradha on M. R. D. Road, has renovated itself and strategically orchestrated its integration with the middle class audience of the city. Fun Cinemas on G. S. Road attracts the middle class and is the premier cinematic exhibition place of the city. In an expanding city, these three exhibition sites explicate the city's growth, its urban processes in time and the increasing spatial complexity of the city environment. Their locations in different parts of the city are markers of the dynamic urban contexts that are formed through various social, economic and cultural factors, and signpost the spatial movement of a city and its different relations with emergent structures.

The sidelining of A. T. Road is exemplified in Rupasree's marginalisation while M. R. D. Road's continuing relevance is reflected in Anuradha's steady assimilation into the mainstream despite its single screen status. Anuradha's repackaging of itself fits in with the modernist plan of the city, as it neatly slots itself into the itinerary of a new urbanity. Meanwhile, Rupasree's falling off the map of the cultural mainstream means its inevitable physical expurgation from the city space, but as it waits it also allows a reclamation of its space by castoffs of this new urbanity, the underclass who can only dream of the multiplexes on G. S. Road.

Forty years ago, what is G. S. Road now was just a lonely extension of A. T. Road, which bifurcated into two national highways in the eastern outskirts of the city. On either side of the road were uninhabited, deserted stretches of land that were barren fields or small agricultural holdings and cattle sheds. Trading activity was concentrated in the area of A. T. Road and Fancy Bazaar, filled with wholesalers, textile merchants, hardware and auto parts shops and the like, while the rest of Guwahati didn't extend much beyond the lonely stretches of G. S. Road. Today, G. S. Road is the new commercial centre of the city, its central place, with commercial establishments vying for the prime real estate in this area of the city. G. S. Road's centrality is exemplified by structures like 'The Hub' shopping mall, whose red and yellow glass façade structure constitutes one of the landmarks on the road. The three floors of 'The Hub' offer a diverse range of consumer experience within its air-conditioned interiors – from salons, music stores, fast food outlets, travel agencies, coffee shop, a gourmet restaurant, a supermarket to a range of shops selling varied branded merchandise. Fun Cinemas, housed within the mall, maximises retail synergies by attracting additional footfall as it offers the middle classes of the city a privileged access to a multiscreen exhibition arrangement, the new cinematic experience of the post-liberalisation era. The multiplex is considered one of the indicators of progress and development in contemporary India, and Fun Cinemas' presence underlines G. S. Road's favoured status as the centre of the new economy of the city.

Athique and Hill observe that specific requirements influence the choice of location for multiplexes in India. While traditional single screen theatres were built in areas with the largest concentration of population, multiplex operators' "analysis of the urban landscape...seeks to identify pockets of affluence with the highest average incomes" (101). Their interviews with a number of multiplex operators reveal how this concept of a "catchment" area drives the locational dynamics of multiplexes. One operator defines the specificities of his catchment: "A catchment is ten minute's driving distance. That defines the demographics, psychographics, the propensity to consume outdoor entertainment

outlets. Disposable income etc...” (101). A media release from INOX states that “location is just as important as content in the multiplex business...the right location attracts higher footfalls and purchasing power” (101). In the context of Guwahati, the easy linkages via connecting roads to middle class residential areas supplement G. S. Road’s high economic activity. This makes it an ideal location for multiplexes, as the area’s economic and socio-cultural centrality is reinforced by its easy access from the clusters of middle class residential areas that surround it. Distance and time as experienced by its middle class demographic thus become crucial to the success of Fun Cinemas and the other multiplexes on G. S. Road. Athique and Hill observe:

The integration of production and consumption experienced in the practice of everyday life, and its formal exploitation through corporate economic planning, highlights the importance of not only commercial and residential districts, but also of the patterns of movement established between these districts. Accordingly, location choice for a multiplex goes beyond the marketisation of populations expressed by demographic indicators to consider the likely trajectories of consumption arising from the capacity of suitable customers to access particular urban spaces...Concentration of wealth and available lands may determine the site of a multiplex, but it is travel time that effectively delimits the catchment area (101-102).

The success of Fun Cinemas and other multiplexes thus rests on the access and the infrastructural support that the centrality of G. S. Road offers. Its wide roads, parking spaces and easy connectivity with middle class residential clusters, coupled with retail hubs and other leisure activities place the multiplex within a supportive infrastructure and a constellation of consumption choices targeted towards its middle class consumer. In fact, apart from Fun Cinemas, three more multiplexes have sprung up within this four-kilometre radius of G. S. Road, underlining its strategic importance as a prime middle class area.

The evolution of Guwahati’s streetscape shows how the economic as well as social, cultural and technological conditions have created and shaped it. The movement of the city is manifested in the spread of its roads as A. T. Road extends southwards to become G. S. Road, transforming itself into the commercial centerpiece of the city, where a new network of streets, commercial frontages, residential blocks and suburbs collaborate in the creation of a new central place. The cinematic, as that “dispersion of practices conditioning and conditioned by an environment” (Hay 224), is entwined with this reconfiguration of the city and the making of a new centrality. Old and new cinema halls thus exist within this dynamic of the reconfigured city, intimately involved with the city and its social relations, and becoming part of its external as well as internal realignments. In Guwahati’s context, they become indices of the changed centre-periphery dynamic of the city itself, their locational dynamics mapping the expanding and reconfigured shape of the city, while their spaces and screens link themselves in a collective itinerary of spectatorial voyage that calibrates the cinematic experience differently for their different audience demographics.

### Rupasree



Fig. 3. Box Office, Exterior, Rupasree

*Rupasree’s box office opens every morning, though there are no queues in front of it. A few young men loiter around for the 11 am show. The film showing is ‘Jungle Love’. The box office area with its*

three separate counters for 'Balcony', 'Rear' and 'Lower' stalls – small cubby holes protected by metal grills – is plastered with posters of C-grade films. The 'Balcony', 'Special' and 'Popular' class tickets are priced at INR 19.80 (USD 0.30), INR 14.68 (USD 0.22 approx.), and INR 13.76 (USD 0.21 approx.) respectively. It opens inwards via another gate to the downstairs lobby area, where a door on the right leads to the lower stalls; a winding staircase on the other side leads to the Balcony section upstairs. Two flights of stairs lead upstairs to a big lounge area. Empty glass-encased display boards labeled 'Coming' hang on its walls, a long row of windows on the other side look down on the cacophony of the street below. Another flight of stairs in the far end leads to the Box Section above.



Fig. 4. Lobby Area, Rupasree

Waiting in the downstairs lobby, I am attracting a fair amount of attention. The projectionist comes down the stairs to enquire the reason for my being here. He then invites me up to sit in the projection room, rather than in the lobby or the hall, while we wait for the film to start. He says that it would not be safe for me to be by myself in the lobby or the hall. My presence is highly unusual in this male-only environment, as women do not come to these shows. Rupasree's current status as a theatre showing only dated sleaze films mean that along with the middle class audience, the female audience as a whole has disappeared from the precincts of this cinema hall. Sohrab Ali, the projectionist, while looping the 35 mm print inside the Cinemaphones projector tells me that he is living 'day to day'. He

*is never sure if the theatre will remain open another day. The theatre is not making any money, and both he and Narayan Singh, the other projectionist, are certain that it is only a matter of time before the cinema hall is sold off and razed down to make space for a new structure.*



Fig. 5. Balcony Section, Rupasree

*Inside the 800-seat theatre, the ornamental ceiling is decorated in geometric shapes. Exhaust fans line the top of the frescoed wall of the balcony section, following its sloping gradient, their openings allowing thin slivers of light to enter the hall. A carved wooden bannister runs along the front of the balcony section, enclosing the area that juts out over the lower stalls. For this show, only a few seats were occupied, mostly in the lower stalls. The balcony section is practically deserted except for two spectators occupying corner seats; the rows of empty seats are covered in a residue of dust. The show begins with an earsplitting crescendo of music, and 'Jungle Love', in a faded and scratch-marked print, flickers to life on screen. Based on a lost and found theme, the film's thin storyline is interspersed with pornographic scenes. In the darkness of the auditorium, pervaded by a dank, musty smell, the screen emits a dim luminescence, and the sound ricochets in the emptiness of the theatre. As the exhaust fans rotate desultorily, slicing the slivers of light in a continuous pattern, the two spectators in the far end of the balcony section of the theatre sit hunched in the shadows of their corner seats. Lone wolf whistles and a few halfhearted catcalls from the lower stalls punctuate the*

show during some of the scenes. (Field Notes, Guwahati, 11 am, 7 March 2013)



Fig. 6. Projection Room, Rupasree

*Jungle Love* would probably be repeated again in a later show that day or maybe not – “maybe today or maybe tomorrow”, the projectionist Sohrab Ali informs me. This illustrates the completely impromptu nature of *Rupasree*’s cinematic menu, a spontaneous arrangement of films that it rotates among its shows. *Rupasree* has no resources to buy new films and the films in its possession are mostly those that have been bought earlier in outright sales, in addition to the few that it still procures from outside sources. In a documentary film on Rupasree, *House of Lost Glory*, Ranajay Deb, one of the suppliers/distributors of sleaze films for Rupasree, says, “I just get Rs 200 or Rs 250 per film, that’s all. Now we have lots of problems and hardships. There is no scope in this business. Maybe we will die of hunger” (*House of Lost Glory*). Projectionist Ali rewinds the film immediately after every screening to keep it ready for a new show. But this circulation of the same cinematic menu does not matter because for *Jungle Love*’s audience the primary draw is not the film itself but the sex scenes incorporated within it. The film acquires value relative to the number of sex scenes that it shows. The film thus becomes interchangeable in this insistent focus on the pornographic, becoming just a carrier for the latter. For its audience, going to the cinema does not involve any consideration of the cinematic menu or a process of pre-selection. Amit Kumar, in his work on the Indian sleaze film industry, observes that “sleaze–audiences do not choose any specific film in advance, they just go the sleaze–theatre; the ‘content’ these men are looking for is the same” (“The Lower Stall” 35).

But Rupasree, which first opened in 1959 as a family-owned cinema hall on A. T. Road, then the commercial centre of Guwahati, was once a premier cinema hall of the city. The city then, sitting on the banks of the Brahmaputra river, was a small town with a radius of a few kilometres, and Rupasree was a bustling cinema hall catering to a large middle class demographic. Apart from the latest mainstream commercial releases, it even screened art house cinema and feature-length documentaries. Filmmaker and critic Altaf Mazid, reminiscing about Rupasree, says: “In Rupasree cinema hall I have watched two of the most unforgettable films of my life. One was Vittorio De Sica’s *Two Women* and the other was Dr. Bhupen Hazarika’s documentary *Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Joymoti*. I saw the former when I was in standard eleven, in 1971” (*House of Lost Glory*).

In those days, Rupasree, along with the other single screen theatres of the city like Apsara, Kelvin, Rupayan, Bijuli, Urvashi and others, organised retrospectives of Italian and French auteurs and screened English-language films as part of their regular shows. Majid recalls:

I remember watching *Dr. Zhivago* sitting in front of Apsara’s 70mm big screen. We were told it was 6-track stereophonic sound. *Anna Karenina*, *Gone With the Wind*, I remember watching these films in these big halls with 1200 people. I remember watching Antonioni’s *Blow Up* in Bijuli, *Ben Hur* in Apsara, Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* in Urvashi...My experience and understanding of cinema, and later my desire to make and write about films, was made possible by these cinema halls of Guwahati. Especially Rupasree, Kelvin, Bijuli, Rupayan, these four cinema halls were my film school. I learnt to look at my life in a new way by going to the cinema, watching these films, while sitting in Guwahati. What more did I want out of my life? (*House of Lost Glory*).

Majid pinpoints the decline of single screen halls in Guwahati from the 80s with the start of the anti-foreigners movement that started in 1979 and continued until 1985, which while seeking to expel

illegal migrants from the state of Assam, also advocated an expunging of cultural influences that were non-local (*House of Lost Glory*). It was a period of unrest and turmoil which affected the larger polity and social fabric, and extracted a heavy cultural price. The atmosphere of political and social unrest vitiated the atmosphere and affected the cultural life of the city. Film screenings suffered as the flow of films, primarily Bengali-language regional films and English-language or foreign films, suddenly stopped. When in the late 80s video and television became popular, it engineered the further disappearance of the middle class from the cinema halls. Finally in the 2000s, the coming of the multiplex radically reorganised the entire distribution-exhibition network, its economic logic making the single screen largely irrelevant.

*Rupasree's* situation is the same as many other single screen theatres in the country who have lost their earlier premier status with the ascendancy of the multiplex. They have become theatres running C-grade sleaze films meant for a low-class audience. Amit Kumar gives an example of *Alankar* theatre in Muzzafarnagar, a small town close to the capital city of New Delhi, which in 2005 had fallen into “playing sleaze for a men-only audience for lower prices” from playing record-breaking shows of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...! /Who Am I to You...!* (Sooraj Barjatya, 1994), one of the top grossing “family films” of the nineties (“The Lower Stall” 30). Kumar observes that “every centre, even big cities have theatres (like *Ritz* and the *Moti* in Delhi and the *Naaz* in Bombay) that do not have the financial resources to purchase mainstream films. Hence, such theatres have to survive on “other” films: primarily sleaze films...Also theatres that have poor grossing capacity are always in danger of falling into the sleaze category” (29).

For *Rupasree*, the contrast between its past and its present is stark. Altaf Majid’s reminiscences of watching art house classics and “Sunday morning shows” in *Rupasree* are in direct contrast to its present cinematic fare of C-circuit sleaze films. The cinematographic experience is said to live in the smooth interlacing of screen space and the physical space of the movie theatre, constituting the

cinematic place inhabited by the viewer. Majid's cinematic place was formed by an eclectic mix of both art house Western and Indian films. The Rupasree of his memories is one that he used to rush to at 3 pm to catch a foreign-language subtitled film as a teenager, or the one where he accompanied his mother and aunts to watch Hindi and Bengali commercial films (*House of Lost Glory*). It evokes a genteel and culturally expansive Guwahati, where the middle-class patronised cinema halls and made even the running of foreign films economically viable.

I didn't have much money, so could only pay about 80 paise for a third class (lower stall) ticket. But sitting in Rupasree's third class section I watched countless English films...Italian films of directors like Vittorio De Sica, Carlo Ponti, Luchino Visconti...they were in Italian with English subtitles (Altaf Majid, *House of Lost Glory*).

Majid's memories of subtitled prints of Italian neo-realist films playing on Rupasree's screen, when juxtaposed with the faded and scratch-marked print of *Jungle Love* presently playing within the crumbling precincts of the same theatre presents an evocative contrast. It underscores the theatre's shift to the periphery and its removal from the cultural mainstream of the city. The screen and the Cinemaphones projector remains the same but the prints that loop through it are now sleaze films for an audience at the lower end of the social spectrum.



Fig. 7. A. T. Road, View from Rupasree

As Guwahati continues to grow, it leaves behind old parts of the city like A. T. Road, stretching out southwards towards a growing city of high rises where the commercial structures of the New Economy dominate. A. T. Road remains the same old narrow road snaking in parallel along the river. Its crowd of shop fronts stretching on both sides of the road is a jumble of clashing signage, overhung by massive fronds of electric wires that crisscross from one side to the other. Buses, cars, cycles, motorbikes, minivans, auto rickshaws, handcarts and pedestrians all vie for right of way along the narrow road, creating a state of perennial congestion. Rupasree's box office adjoins this busy pavement on A. T. Road, separated only by a collapsible metal gate. Its interior is dusty and unclean, the seats are of plastic and broken, the walls are peeling and the projection facilities extremely poor. Its crumbling exterior conveys dilapidation and decay.

But while the theatre has disappeared from the daily film listings of city newspapers, its absence marking its metaphoric erasure from the cultural life of the city, its space has also been reclaimed by the underclass, for whom a changing city of multiplexes has made cinema-going impossible. Ranjay Deb, Rupasree's supplier of sleaze films, says:

You see multiplexes like Cinemax, Fun Cinemas, all standard people go to watch films there. Beggars are not allowed there. Here, people who can only afford Rs 10 to Rs 15 come. Rich people will go to the multiplex. There you get all the extra comforts. Pushback seats, good picture quality. If you go for entertainment, you should enjoy. You won't get that comfort in this hall. (*House of Lost Glory*)

The chasm between the multiplex-going middle class audience and Rupasree's audience who can "only afford Rs 10 to Rs 15" is too wide, and so even as one talks of Rupasree's decline, deterioration and inevitable oblivion, it becomes important to acknowledge that this cinema hall now offers a cinematic experience for that section of the community whom a changing city has pushed out of the

mainstream cultural space. In screening dated C-circuit films, it provides them both personal and private space that a crowded city does not bestow on its poor. In one of the beginning sequences of the documentary film *House of Lost Glory*, an interviewee, pointing to the street kids in the cinema hall, says,

This big hall with a certain ambience gives them the opportunity to live in a dream world. For them it's a kind of happiness. For these little kids who live on the streets, the cinema hall provides them with space. For us, it's about the crowds in the cinema hall that makes it special. But I feel these kids enjoy this empty space more than the movie, because outside on the road they get very little space. If they lie down on the road or pavement, the police might chase them. So when they come inside the cinema hall, they get space for dreaming.

Kumar too observes that cinema halls screening sleaze films offers their audience, comprising the poorer section of the population, that desired "private space" since they "lack[s] the economic capacity to have access to domestic private space" ("The Lower Stall" 31). These marginal halls thus become "a way of gaining access to a private space via a public space" (31). In *House of Lost Glory*, an audience member, a daily wage-earning labourer, says that he comes to Rupasree every day:

Interviewer: They said that you come to the cinema every day.

Man: Yes, every day.

Interviewer: They won't allow you to take leave daily

Man: I just escape...leave work.

Rupasree's forgetting by the cultural mainstream has thus allowed a subaltern community to reclaim this space and imbue it with an imaginative presence of their own. Far removed from the air-conditioned world of multiplexes, it becomes a space which facilitates a cinematic experience for the

underclass of the city.

Rupasree's trajectory in the urban-cinematic configuration – its transference from within the mainstream to the spatial and cultural periphery of the city –illuminates how the reconfiguration of urban space is also a reconfiguration of the cinematic, the latter bearing, as it does, a close relation to urban life, the movement of capital, the policies of governments, and the national imaginary as a whole. In charting the trace of the cinematic within the theatre's precincts, from Majid's memories of De Sica's *Two Women* to the C-grade *Jungle Love*, it becomes possible to discern how exhibition sites are organised as social relations, and how the cinematic, foregrounded by environment, is organised and expressed in particular ways and with particular effects for different audience demographics.

### Anuradha Cineplex



Fig. 8. Exteriors, Anuradha Cineplex

*'Race 2', one of the biggest releases of 2013, has been playing in Anuradha for a week. A sequel to 'Race', the box-office hit of 2011, 'Race 2' is also a multi-starrer like its predecessor. There are long queues at the box office, for both the 'Anuradha Special' seats as well as the 'Upper Stall', and the parking lot is filled with more motorbikes than cars. The audience demographic is overwhelmingly young, mostly college-age youth, for this Saturday morning show. Tickets in hand, they mill about in the open area; some sit in the Oromo café within the compound for refreshments. When the metal*

gates to the downstairs lobby open fifteen minutes prior to the show, the Lower and Upper Stalls quickly fill to capacity.

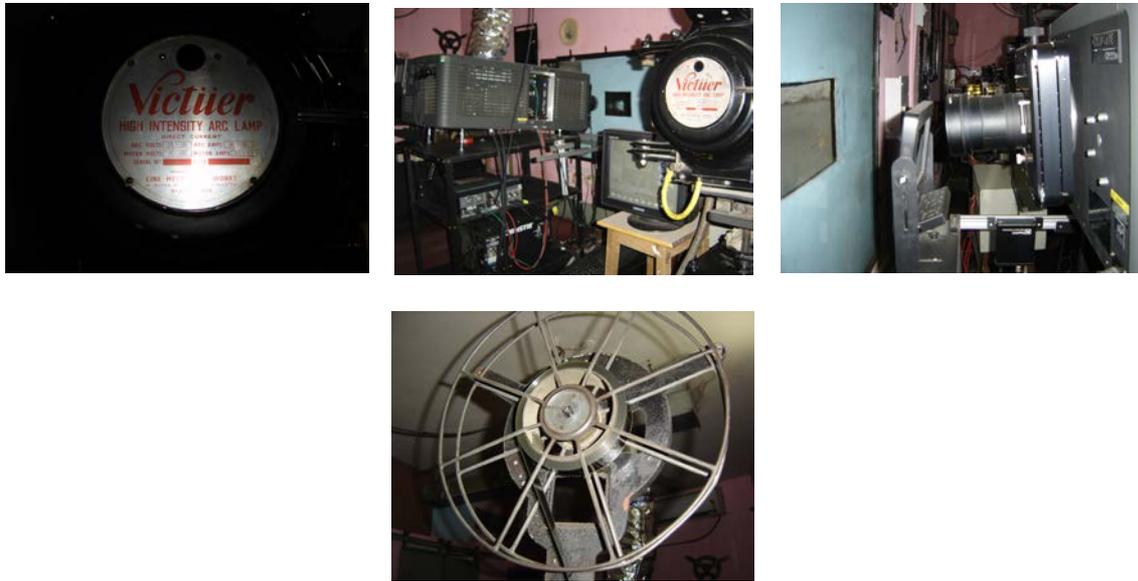


Fig. 9. Analog and Digital Projectors, Anuradha Cineplex

*I accompany the manager to the projection room upstairs as I had requested entry earlier. The old and the new projection equipment stand side by side. The young projectionist has readied the Christie CP2230 digital projector, while the old 35mm Victuer projector stands to one side. The manager explains that the old projector, which is still in good condition, is no longer in use and is just a reminder of the olden days. I watch a part of the film from the window in the projection room.*

*The show begins with the ritualistic parting of heavy velvet curtains to reveal the screen, followed by the whirr of the projector starting. This element at the beginning of a show is a feature that has long been associated with the cinematic event of the Indian single screen theatre. While the multiplex has done away with this paraphernalia, Anuradha has retained this element as part of its cinematic event. The screen lights up with the mandatory public service announcements, followed by a host of advertisements. The audience seems to be still settling in, as people walk in and out through the doors,*

*and ushers with torchlights show people to their seats. But as the Censor Board Certificate comes on screen, signaling the start of the film, the noise gradually dies down.*

*'Race 2' is an action thriller set in Turkey and with an elaborate plot involving multiple heists, murders and deceptions. Liberally peppered with car chases and daredevil stunts, and both male and female bodies on display, it is supplemented by a soundtrack that is already popular because of the heavy pre-release publicity. The audience actively engages with the film, and there is much hooting, clapping, whistling and catcalling from the lower 'Anuradha Special' seats, especially during the high-adrenaline action sequences and the sexually charged scenes. (Field Notes, Guwahati, 10 am, 26 January 2013)*

Actively appreciative interactivity is common single screen Lower Stall audience behaviour, documented in a host of studies (see Lakshmi Srinivas and Amit Rai). But what is interesting is that a predominantly young middle-class audience when seated in the environs of the Lower Stalls in a single screen theatre ends up mimicking the same audience behaviour that is typically attributed to the front benchers, the working class audience of single screen theatres. This phenomenon of a largely young male middle class audience engaged in the same interactive behavioural pattern with the screen as that of a working class audience, in the same environment of the lower stalls explicates how sites of exhibition influence the nature of audience engagement with the screen.

The cinema experience, tied to memory and imagination, is born out of the projection of the film in a communal setting. It becomes a socialized experience, defined through its association with the public space of the movie theatre. Going to the cinema evokes a host of associations, the context of viewing changing the meaning of cinema going. The physical space of the cinema, its design, layout, location, and show timings constitute the material conditions under which the experience of cinema gains its foundation, endowing its form with fullness. The movie theatre in housing this experience thus

becomes entwined with it, facilitating for its spectators a fluid intersection between its material space and its screen space, its materiality in effect becoming an extension of the “cinematographic experience” (Casetti “Relocation”). Giuliana Bruno uses the metaphor of the garment to convey an idea of the manner in which we inhabit “textural spaces” like museums and movie theatres: “to occupy a space is to wear it...A building, like a dress, is worn, and wears out” (32). This tactile nature is what Walter Benjamin had asserted earlier when he stated, “Buildings are appropriated...by touch and sight...this mode of appropriation developed with reference to architecture...today (is) in the film” (233). What Benjamin is alluding to is the sensory experiencing of the lived spaces of both architecture and film that allows the visitor/spectator to make sense of it visibly, audibly and haptically. Similar in their temporal and spatial structures, both architecture and film create mind-spaces, structuring our being-in-the-world, defining the dimensions and essence of existential space (Pallasmaa 13). Like film with its projected images, architecture structures and transforms meaningless Euclidian space into lived spaces, creating an interface between the experiencing self and the world (13). Both afford an experience, directly felt and sensuously available to the spectator/inhabitant, an imaginative process of visual, aural and haptic immersion that amalgamates the external space with our interior world, forging a blend of the material and psychological worlds.

The cinema hall thus comes to hold the “trace of the memories, the attention, imagination and affects of those who have traversed it at different times” (Bruno 9). It becomes “charged with layers of emotions” (9), invested with the ability to absorb the spectator into its particular affective space, in turn binding itself to spectatorial life. While Douglas Gomery and Robert Allen have pioneered research about how the location and physical sites of exhibition contribute to an understanding of the meanings of cinema and by extension, cinema going, Gregory Waller’s more localised research demonstrates how sites of film exhibition provide the context in which films are consumed and experienced. His research on cinema vis-à-vis other forms of commercial entertainment in Lexington,

Kentucky between 1896 and 1930 shows how audiences contextualized films shown at various sites within Lexington differently, and how the choice between different cinemas was essentially a choice between different types of experience.

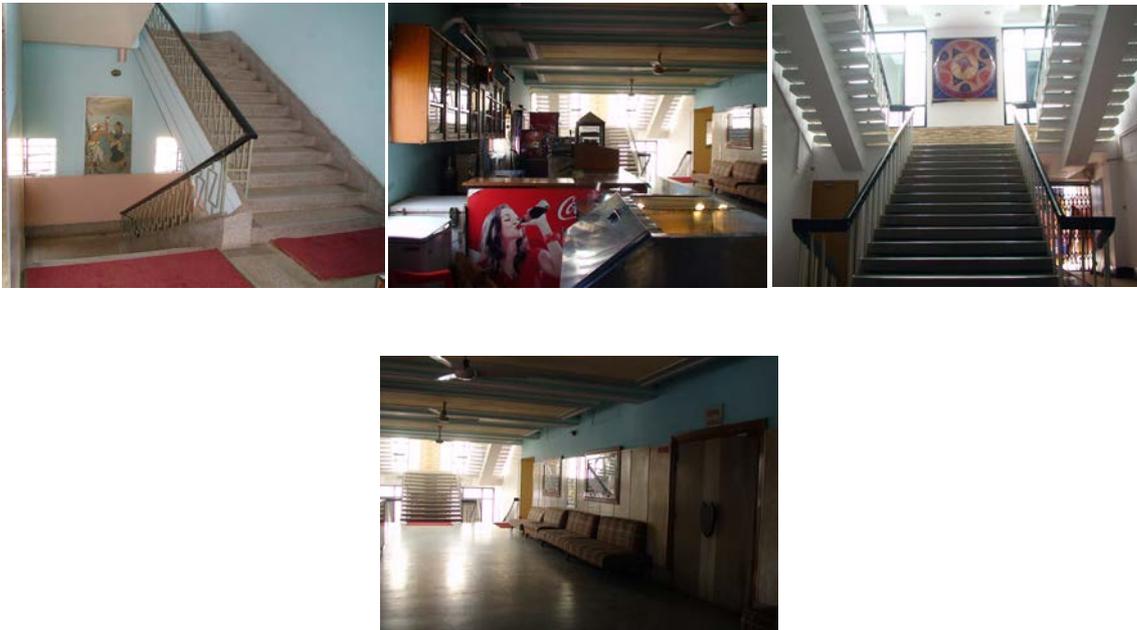


Fig. 10. Lobby Area, Anuradha Cineplex

Anuradha's space, like many single screen theatres, holds a particular ambience – its particular spatial layout, scale, illumination, the texture of its walls, the distinctive odours of its interior, the flow of bodies and intensely responsive atmosphere within its spaces. The history of cinematic screenings within its walls makes it one affective space, and the young, mostly male middle-class audience watching *Race 2* from its Lower Stalls traverses that particular cultural landscape, resonant with “the memories, the attention, and the imagination of those...who have traversed” (Bruno “Atlas of Emotion” 355) the space before them. Pallasma observes that “place and event...are not outside of each other. Mutually defining each other, they fuse unavoidably into a singular experience...experiencing a space is a dialogue, a kind of exchange – I place myself in the space and the space settles in me” (*The Architecture of Image* 22). Absorbed into this intensely affective terrain

of the old single screen theatre, the cinematic event, drawing its ambience from the architecture of its theatrical space, place and time, derives meaning from it and becomes inseparable from it. Thus as an old single screen theatre where a history of spectatorship has left its cultural and affective imprint, Anuradha incites a particular spectatorial journey. Watching *Race 2* from the Lower Stall of the theatre, the young, male middle-class audience in Anuradha is enfolded into the narrative of the place, a narrative that is a mobile, architectural experience of the place. In doing so, it enables the audience to hook itself into the old narrative and re-traverse the same cultural and emotional terrain, re-tracing patterns and codes of spectatorship.

Anuradha thus promotes a particular cinematic experience, one that infuses single screen ambience with multiplex standards. It does this by skillfully serving up nostalgia with all the accoutrements of digital technology and multiplex add-ons, which succeeds in bringing in the target middle-class demographic to its shows. Situated on M. R. D. Road, its proximity to G. S. Road, the new commercial centre of the city, helps to fuse it with the new narrative of the city. But when Anuradha first opened in 1971, forty-five years ago, as a family owned cinema hall, its location on M. R. D. Road was some distance away from the commercial hub of A. T. Road. However, in those days, this pink art-deco style cinema hall with a mural of a traditionally attired male dancer across its façade was more than just a cinema hall screening films. Patronized by the upper and middle classes, it occupied a premier position in the cultural landscape of the city, hosting important literary and cultural events, and this association added to its preeminence.



Fig. 11. Queues for *Race 2*, Anuradha Cineplex

In the face of the multiplex onslaught, Anuradha has tried to stay in business by upgrading itself to multiplex standards while cleverly leveraging the unique selling points of its single screen status. As a profitable single screen theatre in the age of the multiplex, Anuradha's success lies in its smart business decisions and clever marketing strategy. By collaborating with a multiplex chain for its distribution needs, it has successfully managed to sidestep the hazards that single screen theatres face from distributors. Keeping the multiplex consumer in mind, it has re-branded itself as the 'Anuradha Cineplex', renaming its seating sections and pricing its tickets competitively. While the 'Upper Stalls' and 'Box Section' retain the same name, the Lower and Rear Stalls have been rebranded as the 'Anuradha Special'. All the chairs in the Balcony and Box section has been re-fitted and upholstered to multiplex standards, the air conditioning has been upgraded, and the latest sound system installed. While it retains the novelty of the velvet curtains parting way to reveal the screen at the beginning of every show, it has also added multiplex-style food counters in the common lobby of the Balcony and Box sections, as well as a bistro-style restaurant downstairs, next to its box office area.

The tickets are priced at INR 150 (USD 2.50 approx.) for the Upper Stall, INR 200 (USD 3.00 approx.) for the Box Section and INR 80 (USD 1.20 approx.) for the Anuradha Special. This is in contrast to the ticket rates at multiplexes, which are almost triple the price of an Upper Stall ticket in

Anuradha. In addition to its on-site Advance Booking facility, it has brought in Tele-booking and Internet booking of tickets through its website. It has also adopted the multiplex strategy of publicizing itself by tying up with various brands and offering discounted as well as free tickets as prizes, which, while working as good publicity, also raises its profile by association. This strategy of positioning itself as a single screen cinema hall selling a multiplex experience at a lower price, without compromising on quality, has ensured Anuradha's successful continuance as a single screen cinema hall.

Anuradha's pink art deco building with the mural of a dancer still glistens in the sun, and its premises still fill up with the bustle of cinemagoers. In renovating itself into a multiplex-style single screen theatre, it has sidestepped its marginalisation and made itself relevant within the changed cinematic infrastructural framework of the post- liberalisation era. In accordance with this new spatial and temporal logic of a new urbanity, it has rearranged itself – obliterating certain single screen elements and highlighting some, and adding in new multiplex elements to its space. In Anuradha's attempt to transcend its single screen limitations, the new is made visible while also redefining what was visible in the old. But in this process of selective self-erasure, Anuradha also fosters a spectatorial journey which, while erased of its specific single screen elements, is still influenced by the values of the erased original. This play of difference fosters a spectatorial voyage, a collective 'work of the imagination' that redefines the nature of its presence within the physical and imaginative matrix of the city.

### **Fun Cinemas**

*David has been running in the Fun Cinemas multiplex since its release on 1 February, the previous Friday. Initial box office reports of the film suggest that the first weekend of its release has seen a steady taking in at multiplexes, though it remains to be seen if the film will pick up momentum in the second week of its release. Standing in the lobby, waiting for the show to begin, the crowd is initially*

*sparse. But the audience slowly trickles in and a sizeable crowd gathers closer to the show, an audience demographic primarily consisting of the young college-age crowd. The concession counters remain busy with popcorns, colas and coffee being sold while people wait for the auditorium doors to open for the show. As the neon sign of 'Screen-1' above the door of the first auditorium lights up and the door opens, people slowly line up to enter. The inside of the 300-seater auditorium is softly lit and pleasantly cool, with pushback seats arranged in symmetrical rows of raked seating, at a comfortable distance from the screen. Polite ushers in smart uniform guide people to their seats, a few cell phones ring, lowered voices and discreet laughter float around. The lights dim down, and in the darkness of the silent auditorium, the screen lights up with the animated logo of the multiplex chain.*



Fig. 12. Screen-I Auditorium, Fun Cinemas

*The two-hour long film runs with a short interval in between, when the auditorium softly lights up, allowing people to get out from their seats for a quick break. But it is a forced interval on the part of the multiplex because the film apparently does not make space for it. The audience does not seem to be visibly restless for the break. A few wander out, mostly males, though most remain seated in their seats. Attendants from the concession counters outside the auditorium wander in with trays of coffee and snacks for those sitting inside. Soft murmurs and chatter and mobile phones ring during this*

*passage of time. The lights taper off after about ten minutes and the film resumes immediately. All throughout, it is a quiet audience who watch the film, expressing almost no audible reaction to the screen. (Field Notes, Guwahati, 12:30 pm, 4 February 2013)*

*David* (2013) is an ensemble film, a triptych of three narratives somewhat tenuously connected to each other by having the main protagonists of its three narratives named David; the climaxes of the three stories, though set in different decades, also take place on the same date of 3<sup>rd</sup> March. Sangita Gopal claims that such ensemble films are typical of the ‘multiplex film’, given that the interconnected set of stories seems to reflect the “demographic and cultural diversity” of the middle class as well as its containment within an “overarching network structure” as well as the architectural phenomenology of the multiplex (140-141). She posits a direct relation between the multiple screens of the multiplex and the multiple narratives of a large number of multiplex films, connecting the arrival of the multiplex with the coterminous emergence of a large number of such ensemble films.

In *David*, the three story arcs are as follows: the first, set in 1975 in Bradford, England, deals with a son’s suspicion of his adoptive father’s role in the murder of his real father; in the second, set in 1995 Mumbai (India), a son’s desire to avenge the public humiliation of his father ends in forgiveness; and the third, set in 2010 Goa (India) is about a man’s obsessive romantic pursuit of his best friend’s fiancée. The three stories, though set in different decades, progress simultaneously, with frequent cross-cutting between the different plotlines. Sangita Gopal is of the opinion that such cross-cutting in these multiplot films, instead of generating suspense or a sense of impending collision that its deployment usually serves to bring out, functions in this instance to “help establish a formal equivalence between plotlines, thus undoing the older arrangement of main and subplots, major and minor characters” (144). In *David*, the equal primacy of the three narratives is accentuated by a parallel editing that navigates smoothly between different storylines, serving to underline its thematic cohesiveness. It traces a movement that, even while it splices the three narratives in a rapid

intermixing, actually serves as a reminder of the relevance of the narratives to each other even if their interconnection is brief and tenuous. Gopal observes that such multiplot design “forces the viewer to reach for the bigger picture” to make sense of all the divergent plotlines (141) even when as in the case of *David*, the diegesis of the three narratives does not really offer a shared commonality except the protagonist’s names.

Within the precincts of the modern multiplex, this narrative strategy echoes the coming together of the different fractions of the middle-class as a viewing public “in such a manner that each retains its particularity even as it partakes of the ethos of a generalised consumerist culture” (140). The multiplex audience at Fun Cinemas is a demographic marked by cultural diversity, linguistic, religious as well as tribal, but it is a diversity contained within the structure of the middle class; their easy admittance within the controlled access of the multiplex subsumes their differences within the “homogenising plane of modern capital” (140). Admittance to the artificially cooled spaces of Fun, its designed lounge area and concession counters, the pushback seats, the cosy auditorium, the short and patient queues, subsumes the diversity of the audience to the class and consumption-based group exclusivity that the multiplex has been designed to promote. On its screen, the “narratives of adjacency”, like that of *David*, “habituate us to new forms of social diversity” but “together signify the middle class as a differentiated collective” (141).

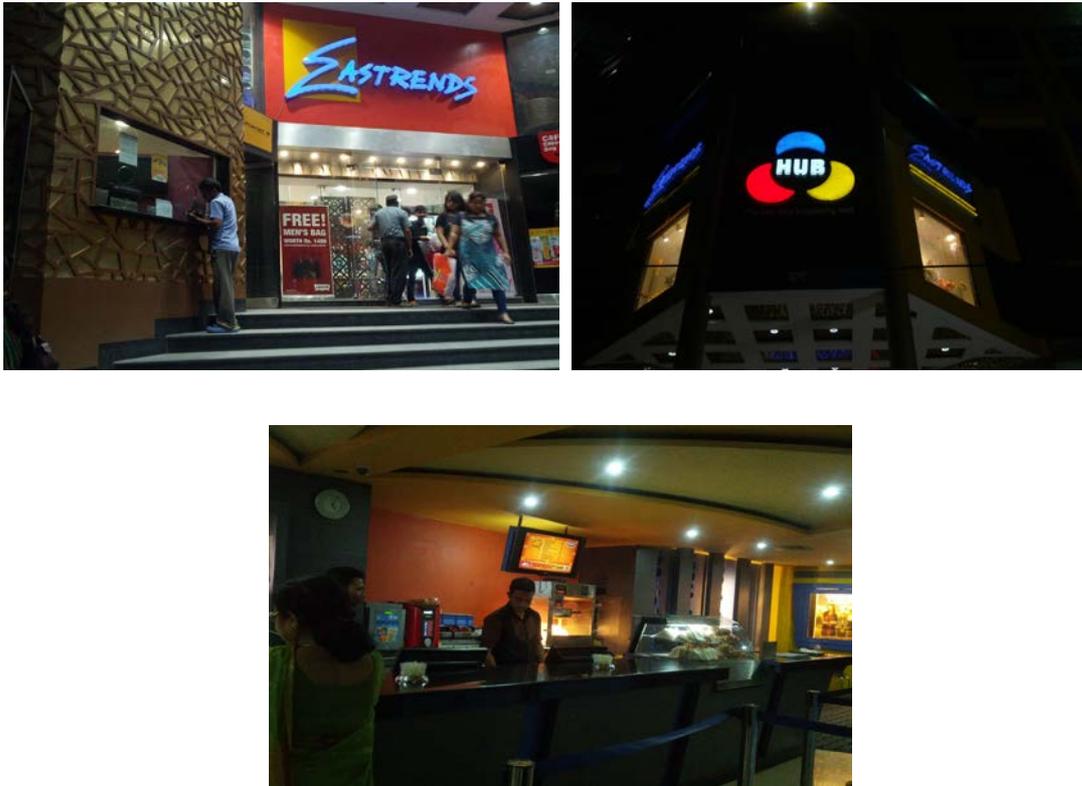


Fig 13. Exterior, Hub Shopping Mall / Lobby Area, Fun Cinemas

Fun Cinemas is housed within the Hub shopping mall, whose three floors offer a diverse array of leisure choices. For the multiplex viewer, going to Fun may also involve an engagement with the other entertainment options available at the mall. Cinema-going thus becomes an activity bound to a constellation of leisure choices all vying for the attention of the multiplex visitor. This spatial logic of the multiplex space, with its diversity of views and multiplicity of perspectives, is reprised, Gopal observes, in the multiplot film. She argues that this splicing together of the multiple plotlines in many multiplex films “resembles the many offerings at the multiplex theater, all catering effectively to the same class of viewer” (145). In drawing this connection between this formal element of a multiplex film and the physical space of the multiplex, Gopal underlines that the propinquity between the cinematic and city is not just social or cultural, but spatial as well. Giuliana Bruno observes that film inherited the “spatial desire” of its predecessors like the arts of panoramic painting, garden layout and

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architecture, taking the spectatorial body through unexpected paths of exploration (*Atlas of Emotion* 171-172). As the cinematic impulse was primarily urban, the nature of urban traversal has come to be embedded in the very language of film, in its shots, editing and camera movements. On film, space is framed for view and offers itself for traversal, embodying a similar practice of space as the contemporary traversal through urban configurations by the city dweller. In the multiplot film, this practice of space is manifest in its formal structuring – as it mediates the spatial model of the multiplex, offering windows to different story spaces, but integrating them through the overarching omniscience of the framework that like the city itself, structures the film (Gopal 143).

Gopal suggests that multiplot films belong to the second generation of multiplex films, coming in at the second half of the 2000s, “entrusted with broadening the audience of the multiplex film to include the proliferating middle classes in all of urban India” (140). ‘The Hub’ shopping mall comprising the twin screen Fun Cinemas multiplex was built only in 2011, and its appearance in Guwahati, a second-tier city, is part of the overall expansion of the multiplex chain beyond the major metropolitan centres. The opening of ‘The Hub’, offering a range of leisure activities from coffee chains, restaurants, salons, shops offering branded apparel and other branded merchandise among other things, created an exclusive place for the middle class of the city to go to. Its red and yellow trimmed glass façade remains one of the hotspots of the city, offering globalised urban leisure activities for the middle class consumer. Fun Cinemas, anchored within the mall, offers an analogous experience in terms of its alignment with the globalised urban ethos of the shopping mall. High priced tickets, plush auditoriums, stocked concession counters, the latest digital projection and sound equipment make the cinematic experience distinctly different from those of the single screen theatres of the city. Athique and Hill, commenting on “the degree of intent displayed in the conceptualizing of the multiplex crowd”, term it as ‘audiencing’ – the act of consciously trying to shape its audience into a consuming class, employing “socio-economic filtering, architectural dispersion and ideological diffusion that... imply a profound

psychological effect upon patrons” (165). Indeed, going to the multiplex in India is an exclusive class-based affair coded by consuming behaviours in keeping with the aspirational global lifestyle.

The middle class audience in Fun watching *David* belongs to the same demographic – consumers of the New Economy, populating restaurants, hotels, malls and car showrooms. They exist within the new spatial and imaginative coordinates of a globalizing India, their spectatorial journey involving a smooth transportation from the new physical spaces of the reconfigured city to the cool glass-fronted environs of the multiplex. It is a traversal where the multiplex and its screen constitute “horizons of globality” (Appadurai “The Right to Participate” 34) and become part of the material through which its audience can envision a new modernity. The number of screens or the range of entertainment and leisure choices may differ between those in the major metropolitan areas and that of the smaller towns and cities, as in the case of Fun Cinemas in Guwahati, but the experience on offer is within a framework of the globalised experience of the multiplex. It is thus an environment of leisure and consumption within which Fun offers its patrons a cinematic experience, one that unites them with middle class multiplex audiences across the country.

As Guwahati reconfigures itself, changing in its meaning and character, its cinematographic theatres are transforming too, shifting locations and embracing styles, building new audiences and forging new relationships with them. As the old parts of the city extend onto the ‘new’ spaces, the reconfigured arrangement of the old and the new is expressed in spatial, architectural and filmic terms. It constructs the material framework in which forms of everyday life, social relations, as well as individual and group representation take place, reflecting differing imaginary worlds between the old and the new. Fun, Rupasree and Anuradha, located within this network of the old and the new, display the contrasting spatialities that stem from differing cultural imaginaries. While Fun Cinemas aligns itself with the new modernity of the city, Rupasree’s location in the spatial periphery of the city is also reflected in its cultural marginalization, as it screens a string of dated C-circuit films that exist far

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outside the mainstream. Anuradha Cineplex, meanwhile, has rechristened and multiplexed itself to blend into the mainstream. Its velvet curtains, a remnant of its single screen heritage, part to reveal a screen on which unfolds the latest releases projected through the latest projection system for an audience ensconced in multiplex-style comfort. The contrasting spectatorial voyages of these three exhibition sites also explicate the same centre-periphery dynamic, initiated and negotiated as they are through different spatialities within the city.

Exhibition spaces produce a cinematic event that is a coming together of the actual screen space, the material structure of the cinema hall and the cinemagoer. And the cinematographic experience that results is an amalgamation of the representation of cinematic space on screen, the socio-spatial context of cinema going and the collective reception of the audience to that space and place. Cinema going thus contains within itself issues of how text and aesthetics intersect with exhibition infrastructure, distribution and production, the nature of the spectatorial voyage that flow into exhibition spaces, as well as the historical, social and cultural factors that impact on filmmaking and cinema going.

## 4

### **Separate Publics, Separate Spaces**

#### The Multiplex Circuit and the Mass Circuit

The multiplex and the single screen theatre embody two different cinematic experiences in contemporary India, their spaces and audiences defined by their location within the cultural geography of the city. They articulate differing organisations of physical space, and a differing arrangement of spectatorial flow within their respective spatial layouts. They differ in the structure and size of their screens, in the size and arrangement of their seating capacity, in their ticket prices, and in the organisation of show timings. Their contrasting architectural styles, one mostly old style art deco and the other modernist chrome and steel, interact differently with their surrounding spaces. Each thus becomes tied to a separate audience demographic, influencing the kind of films that are screened within their spaces.

#### **Phenomenological Spaces**

The Indian single screen theatres, inheritors of the complex spatial politics of the colonial order, articulate a space that is physically a continuum of the colonial exhibition space, incorporating in its spatial arrangement the compulsions and attendant anxieties surrounding egalitarian film exhibition in

colonial India. On the other hand, the multiplex, iconic architectural harbinger of post-liberalisation India, articulates a plush new spatial arrangement, exclusionary in its admittance, but homogenized in its organisation of physical space. In these two distinct sites of public viewing, the movement of the spectator through their spaces, initiates different spectatorial journeys.

The spatial layout of the single screen theatre was, and still is, a segregated arrangement of ‘front stalls’, ‘rear stalls’, ‘balcony’ or ‘upper stalls’ and ‘boxes’. This configuration, is laid out front to back, differentiated by an ascending hierarchy of ticketing prices, with the cheapest seats (the ‘front stalls’ followed by the ‘rear stalls’), placed upfront and the expensive ones (‘upper stall’ or ‘balcony class’), placed at the back. The ‘upper stall’ or ‘balcony class’ or ‘dress circle’ as it is often called, is housed on the upper floor and connected by a winding staircase from the lower lobby, jutting out over the rear stalls. The ‘box’ section, a still more exclusive space with the fewest seats, is housed another level up from the ‘balcony’ class. In these thousand-seat theatres, this spatial configuration, accommodating a diverse viewing population, created a pattern of perspectives between the screen and the three levels of gallery space. The lower classes, paying less, seated upfront, close to the screen, and the middle classes, paying relatively more, and seated at the back, were involved in a differing interplay of exhibition-reception dialectics, as distance and positioning from the screen influenced the reception of the film text. Thus a multiplicity of spectatorial perspectives with diverse viewpoints implicated in the inverse power dynamics of the viewing demographic, affected ways of seeing, which in turn influenced the filmmakers’ own manipulations of narrative space.

Sangita Gopal has posited the question as to whether the form of the all-India film, with its packaging of *masala* elements has been influenced by the “vectors and intensities” of the frontbenchers (130). She also wonders, as another corollary, if the middle class audience seated at the back, at a distance from the screen, was always predisposed to a more realist mode of narration (130). She observes that “the Indian Cinematograph Committee Report of 1928 – commissioned by the colonial administration

with a view to rationalise film censorship – repeatedly testifies how exhibition space, the composition of the audience, and film form articulate with each other...[as] anxieties surrounding on-screen sexuality, for instance, are directly linked in the report to the nature of theatre architecture and the egalitarian mode of film exhibition” (128). This raises interesting lines of inquiry, because in the exploration of this question not only are the socio-economic configuration of the audience and the attendant psycho-social aspect of this assembled mass brought into play, but the spotlight is also placed on the physical positioning of this section of the audience in the spatial layout of the theatre.

In her phenomenological account of film experience *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Vivian Sobchak proposes that the filmmaker, film and spectator are entwined within a pattern of exchange of perception and expression via an “existential and embodied act of viewing” (21). She suggests that this *act of viewing* links filmmaker, film and spectator in a “homeomorphic existential performance” which makes visible “the invisible, intrasubjective commutation of perception and expression” in our filmic experience (21). The filmic experience is thus a site of negotiation of dynamic and directionally reversible multiple visions, from the interstices of which previously hidden and imperceptible meanings emerge. This embodied vision, ‘the address of the eye’, of both film and spectator, gives rise to a systemic form of communication, one that makes possible a conveyance of meaning beyond the play of light and shadow wrought by the projection of twenty-four frames per second on a flat surface (6).

For Sobchak, film is always more than its material presence and she suggests that film achieves this signification because the *substance* of its language consists of our modes of embodied existence (seeing, hearing, physical and reflective movement) while the *structures* of its language are derived from our structures of direct experience with the world around us – “the centering and bodily situating of existence in relation to the world and others” (4-5). Sobchak’s paradigm of cinematic signification, grounded thus in the embodied situation of the spectator and the film, aims to derive its

meaningfulness “as it is lived through and embodied in an enworlded subject of vision, that is, as it occurs existentially and directly *for us* and *before us*, rather than abstracted from us or posited against us” (27-28). In deriving its meaningfulness from the practices of human experience, phenomenology’s systemic reflections are grounded “not (in) time, but space – the significant space lived as and through the objective body-subject, the historical space of situation...locating it in the structure and meanings of phenomena in the contingency and openness of human existence” (31-32).

Until the arrival of the multiplex in the late 1990s, cinema-going in India had always been associated with the ‘cinema hall’, a single screen theatre with a specific spatial arrangement and architectural design; the “frontbenchers”, filling up the front and rear stalls, have constituted an important component of the cinematic experience of the Indian single screen theatres. Their active interaction with the screen, the energy of their almost hyper-real engagement with it, transforms the space of the theatre with an almost kinetic dynamism. In this “transcendent space” (25) made forceful and deep by a spectatorial identification with the screen that is passionate in its intensity, the screen responds with a packaging of thrills and the staging of spectacles driven by high-voltage star power. Ashis Nandy and Ashish Rajadhyaksha have both alluded to the power of the frontbenchers in the shaping of Indian popular cinema. Nandy bluntly positions popular Indian cinema as arising out of a “slum’s eye view” (7), while Ashish Rajadhyaksha ascribes its heterogeneous form to a specific mode of production freed from institutional regulations, reflecting the process of democratic politics of the nation.

Rajadhyaksha suggests that the “baseline frontal address” of Indian popular cinema, that tradition of direct exchange of looks between the screen and the audience, resulting in a more frontal positioning of its images in relation to the audience, iterates “the contract between the apparatus and the viewer”, acknowledging “the paying viewer’s right to receive images” (qtd in Gopal 129). This leads Gopal to observe that the mode of address in the traditional popular film was one that admitted the spectator into the party “by looking (him) in the eye” (130). The “eye” of the frontbencher thus becomes crucial

in shaping the all-India film, influencing its combination of thrills, romances, fights and song and dance routines. Packaged in a *masala* format, it has held sway over the Indian single screen theatres since the seventies until the arrival of the multiplex in the late nineties.

Even though action held sway in the seventies and eighties, this period also saw the birth of the “middle class cinema” and the art house “parallel cinema” movement. The “multiplex film’ of today traces its lineage to this middle class cinema as well as parallel cinema, both of which marked by a “indexical realism and formal innovation...sought to access the contemporary from the vantage of the nascent middle class” (Prasad qtd in Gopal 134). The reason why the latter was not able to be sustained was to some extent because of the paucity of suitable exhibition venues (Gopal 134). The dominance of the multiplex today revives a more realist mode of narration favoured by that section of the audience used to sitting at the back of single screen theatres. Removed from the “vectors and intensities” (130) of the lower stalls, the middle class, situated now in a homogeneous intimate setting of the multiplex, finds itself in a position to dictate the narrative impulses of multiplex narratives.

### **Two Circuits**

The current industry buzzwords of the ‘multiplex circuit’ and the ‘mass circuit’, neatly separating the two exhibition spaces, reflect this reality, the nomenclature coming with its own set of connotations regarding audience class and composition. In their book, *The Multiplex in India*, Athique and Hill conducted several small-scale survey studies coupled with a series of focus-group discussions among multiplex patrons in the cities of Bangalore, Baroda and Kolkata in the early part of 2007. In addition to the respondents’ underlining of how the facilities in multiplexes are far superior to that of single screen theatres, what emerged strongly across all the three cities was the desire of the multiplex audience to rhetorically differentiate themselves from the general single screen theatre audiences. Athique and Hill noted the major usage of the term ‘ambience’ by respondents, especially in

Bangalore, to describe their preference for the multiplex, as all stressed on the ‘uncomfortable and inconvenient experience’ of single screen theatres, from seating and projection facilities to hygiene and safety. But the common thread that bound the findings of the survey is a strong vocalization of their distaste for the more ‘active’ mode of engagement of single screen audiences (the ‘hooting’, ‘clapping’ and ‘whistling’ of the ‘cheap crowd’), which hampered their enjoyment of the film experience. The view that their cinematic preferences were different, even better, than those of single screen audiences were echoed across the spectrum of opinions offered across the three cities; the “inability of the lower classes to appreciate good work”, as one male respondent in Baroda said, was buttressed by others in Kolkata, with one expressing it as the contrast between “their view of things and our view of things”, and another defining it as a “psychological difference”. The survey findings illustrate the schism across class lines that the multiplex has generated, as it creates a space which allows the middle class to get away from “the run-of-the-mill crowd” and enjoy a film with “people like us” (165-189).

Athique and Hill’s study illustrates how the multiplex and the single screen theatre have come to represent the polarization between “their view of things and our view of things” (183). Ensclosed in different spaces, the screens thus respond to their audiences by unfolding differing cinematic landscapes. Even though the multiplex circuit has fewer numbers of screens as compared to the total number of single screen theatres, it has emerged as a crucial factor to a film’s success, as it is the exhibition space favoured by a middle class privileged with the power to drive box-office returns. While films are still released across both multiplexes and the still operational single screen theatres, the balance is skewed in the multiplex’s favour, with more films being released across multiplexes than single screens.

This chapter compares two films, *Nautanki Saala / Drama King* and *Commando: A One Man Army*, both of which were released on April 12, 2013 – the former releasing across 950 screens and the latter

across 1450 screens. Trade websites and analysts predicted the trajectory of their box office takings on the day of their release, slotting them into categories of ‘multiplex’ and ‘single screen’ film respectively, observing that while “*Nautanki Saala* is an out and out multiplex film, *Commando* would be eyeing its audience at the single screens” (Tuteja). *Boxofficeindia.com*, a trade website tracking box-office earnings, reported that

[d]istributors feel both films will generate good numbers at the ticket counter, but will but will appeal to different kinds of audiences. While they expect *Commando* to rule the single screens, *Nautanki Saala!* is more likely to do well at the multiplexes. (Sengupta)

*Commando* had a “decent opening” with around 50 per cent capacity in the Delhi-UP sector and 35 percent and 25 percent in West Bengal and Rajasthan respectively. *Nautanki Saala* opened at 20-30 percent in the Delhi-UP sector and 25 percent and 20 percent in West Bengal and Rajasthan respectively (Sengupta). Another trade website reporting on the box office dynamics of both films over the weekend, observed that

*Commando* took the lead on day one but *Nautanki Saala* not only caught up but took the lead...Both notched up similar figures for the weekend. One was powered by the single-screen audience, the other by urban multiplex audiences. (theW14)

Trade analyst Taran Adarsh announced in his tweets:

#Nautanki Saala! Friday (collection) Rs 3.25 crore. Picked up at the multiplexes of urban centres.

#Commando excellent at single screens of mass circuits. (IANS “Ayushmann”)

The release of a film like *Commando: A One Man Army* (2013) at this time is an interesting development. 2013 has also seen the emergence of big-budget star-driven films like *Chennai Express*

(2013), *Jab Tak Hai Jaan/While the Heart Still Beats*, 2013) *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani /This Mad Crazy Youth* (2013), which seem to consciously address both the multiplex and the mass circuit by adopting a more expansive address. But *Commando* has been expressly labeled as a film “for the masses”, articulating the split between the multiplex and the single screen in very clear terms. Dilip Ghosh, director of *Commando* states that “the film was designed for the masses and the response from them has been phenomenal – *taalis* (claps), *sitis* (whistles) and coin throwing” (Personal Communication, Facebook, 9 May 2013). It is obvious that for the makers of *Commando* their ideal audience is in the single screen theatres that actively engage with the film. The film thus carries this consciousness of the exhibition space in its very structure. Thus any discussion of the film has to engage with how the phenomenology of the exhibition space is implicated in the cinematic text.



Fig. 14. Film Posters of *Nautanki Saala!* (2013) & *Commando* (2013)

### Different Heroes, Different Journeys

*Nautanki Saala* (2013), adapted from the French film *Après Vous* (2003) is a romantic comedy about a compulsive do-gooder Ram Parmar who rescues an unemployed drifter Mandar from a suicide attempt

and attempts to set the latter's life in order. But in the process of uniting Mandar with his ex-wife, he falls in love with her, and the heart of the film is Ram's negotiation of his feelings for her. But *Nautanki Saala* engineers a narrative twist wherein Ram, who is a theatre actor and director, plays the character of Ravana in "Ravan Leela", the stage version of "Ramayana", which he produces and directs, and where he contrives to cast the hapless Mandar as Ram. "Ramayana" is an ancient epic narrative which is the story of how king Ram wages war against the demon king Ravana, after the latter abducts his wife Sita; Ram ultimately kills Ravana and destroys his kingdom. In *Nautanki Saala* the narrative device of having one of the protagonists of the film, Ram, to play Ravana on stage, and the other, Mandar, to play Ram on stage, is obviously a play on Ramayana's story. The "Ramayana" ultimately ends in Ravana's defeat and the destruction of his kingdom. In *Nautanki Saala*, Ram's falling in love with Mandar's wife leads to no such repercussions – Ram (playing Ravana on stage) gets together with Mandar's ex-wife and at the end Mandar (playing Ram on stage) is shown driving away with the actress who plays Sita on stage.

It is a clever sleight of storyline wherein the film inverts the narrative of the ancient epic and retells it for its multiplex audience. The film's narrative is built around an alternation across two story-spaces – the story-space of the film where the actual events take place and the story-space of the theatrical stage within the film. The film thus concocts a spatial paradigm to explicate both sides of this moral universe, with the stage serving as a real as well as a symbolic/metaphorical space where the epic narrative plays out concurrently. In this retelling of an epic under a comedic garb, the moral space that the film constructs is one that incorporates and addresses the complexities of modern urban Indian life. Although *Nautanki Saala* as a modest romantic comedy does not aspire to the scale and breadth of the epic, its quirky retelling of the familiar tale is important, because in the re-telling of the epic it re-imagines an audience. It constructs a space where the protagonist Ram can fall in love with someone else's (ex-) wife without inviting social opprobrium and moral censure, with the narrative contriving to

accommodate that coupling. This slippage is significant because it indicates a narrativization that is tied to the psychology of a specific audience demographic of a particular cinematic exhibition space.

But while the hero's struggles in the path of love are fraught with a certain degree of complication, it is a struggle that is largely internal – the stakes are personal, the 'drama' fought out within the boundaries of the home and workplace. The city serves as a backdrop to the series of events that complicate his love life; its swanky flower shops, wide streets, salons and restaurants constitute the setting where it is all played out. But the city at no point has any stake in his struggle; his struggles remain just his, a blip in the larger ebb and flow of city life. Thus, although Ram's journey is played out within the familiar confines of an urban space, with its familiar landmarks, it is a deeply personal journey, almost anonymous in its ordinariness. Ram is a good person, generous and forgiving. He is also a hero in saving Mandar and trying to set his life in order, but Ram also ends up betraying Mandar in a way when he falls in love with Mandar's ex-wife, the woman Mandar still loves. And Ram struggles with the implications of his actions, wrecked by guilt and befuddled by the course of events.

It is on stage that Ram is somewhat able to transcend that ordinariness, as his life-size cutout dominates the façade of the theatre where his show "Ravan Leela" is staged every weekend. We get glimpses of this transformation, as in the opening shot of Ram on stage in a Ravana costume taking an encore from the audience. He is framed against the stage lights forming a halo around him, and the next shot cuts to him coming out of the theatre and tracking with him as he gets on to his car, the life size cutout of his poster glittering in the background. It carries over to the scene immediately after where he saves Mandar from a suicide attempt and takes him home, anxiously trying to prevent a recurrence of the attempt. But he eventually slips when in the process of uniting Mandar with his ex-wife, he falls in love with her.

*Commando: A One Man Army* (2013) tells the story of Karanveer Singh Dogra, an elite army

commando, whose helicopter crashes on the wrong side of the Indo-China border in a freak accident. Captured by the Chinese army and imprisoned as a spy, Karanveer undergoes extreme torture but refuses to declare himself a spy, an admission that would have had wide diplomatic ramifications between the two countries. Abandoned by the Indian government to his fate, Karanveer manages a daring escape on the way to his execution and reaches a small town in the foothills of northern India en route to his army base. An ellipsis in the form of title credits intervenes and the next sequence unfolds in the small hilly town of Dilerkot in the Punjab-Himachal border, where a grotesque and corrupt politician terrorizes the town, hand in glove with the local police. Dilerkot thus becomes the landscape where the hero becomes the force who brings justice for the oppressed and sets things right.

As an action film, specifically targeted to present-day single screen theatre audiences, *Commando* works within a single pointed focus on pure action and does away with narrative embellishments. The physical energy of its lead imparts value, the screen space creating a milieu which serves as the topography for the showcasing of its protagonist's heroism – a hero whose cinematically heightened, almost supra-human persona exists in a sort of a counterpoint to the oppressive spaces around him. Karanveer is already anointed special, as the introductory sequence lay out. Belonging to an elite army battalion, he is identified as the most special even amongst those. Karanveer's specialness sets him apart, marks him out from among his contemporaries, the one most able to face the destiny that awaits him. The nine-minute introductory sequence which sets the background to Karanveer's arrival in desolate and terrorized Dilerkot emphasizes his supra-human persona, his face and body constituting an expansive bodyscape on which to inscribe the hopes and desires of many.

The staple of the single screen, the action packed *masala*, rose out of the socio-economic landscape of India. Until the fifties and sixties, the middle class favoured social melodramas dominated the screen, but the changes in the exhibition and distribution sector saw the rise of the action packed films of the seventies. The arrival of the 'angry young man' on the silver screen of the 70s forever changed the

course of Hindi cinema, its genre predominance and its concept of stardom. As I delineated in Chapter 2 of this thesis, from the hulky Dara Singh persona of the 40s the action hero changed to the angst-ridden Amitabh Bachchan persona of the 70s. In this change, the hero seemed to embody within him the anger and frustration of a nation stuck in a morass – of overwhelming corruption, bureaucratic incompetency, the almost-failure of democracy in the short-lived Emergency period, and the increasing disillusionment by the failure of those promises made to a newly independent nation three decades ago. In the persona of Amitabh Bachchan, these energies conflated to construct a hero whose rakish individuality makes him chart his own (often violent) path, at loggerheads with societal mores and values, but triumphant against all odds. But the Bachchan persona was also embellished with a narrative trajectory that furnished it with settings and plot points that allowed melodramatic elements to be weaved in. The opulent villain's lair, the hero's mansion, the elaborate songs and dances were all essential ingredients of the action films of the 70s.

In *Commando*, Karanveer's personal transformative trajectory from abandonment to triumph is thus designed to reflect the larger hoped-for transformation in the polity. His successful struggle to reclaim his honour and integrity against an oppressive establishment is aspirational, reflective of a similar struggle faced by the common man. This hero's journey is thus an externalization of the hopes and desires of many, his battleground the complex spaces of contemporary India. *Commando* in that sense, is also a meta-narrative, as Karanveer, expressly "a one-man army", is embroiled in a familiar struggle against a corrupt establishment. In this battle, his destiny is one that is entwined with the audience's and by extension with that of the nation, as he fights the overwhelming triad of the army, the police force and the political establishment. The introductory sequence thus contains a suggestion of the major tropes that structure *Commando*, from the representation of 'India' as a complex space where oppressive regimes wield hegemonic power to the transformative possibility vested in an individual.

## **Modes of Address: Intimacy and Distance in the Exhibition Space**

*Nautanki Saala* starts off with two voice-overs, one after the other, spoken by the same gently persuasive male voice. The first voice-over, fading in right after the showing of the Censor Board Certificate and the orchestral crescendo accompanying the multiplex logo, and running alongside the visual track of the title cards of the film's production acknowledgments, welcomes the audience thus:

*Ladies and gentlemen, please give us a hand. We welcome you to Ravan Leela produced by Dramebaaz Nautanki Company. I, Ram Parmar, actor and director, alias RP, request you to put your hands in your neighbour's pocket and switch off their cellphone. Extend the same courtesy to plastic bags, handbags and bangles. However, there are no rules against laughing or crying. And for your information, all the characters in the play are not fictional in the least. So have fun.*

The second voice-over starts in the middle of the second set of animated screen credits of the production and distribution company. It quickly segues from an aphoristically worded third-person narration to a self-revealing first-person one:

*Actually, a great actor is one who can lie on stage with the utmost conviction and in life, the one who can lie to uphold the truth, is one who is called a drama queen! The curtain never falls on this real life drama, and Doctor, this is why I can't sleep.*

The opening credits fade out to white with these last words and then fade in to the opening scene at the psychiatrist's office, as the camera zooms out and tracks back to reveal the protagonist standing with his back to camera, looking out the window.

*Nautanki Saala's* introductory voice-overs surface out of the title sequence, float around in the darkened theatre, engaging the spectators into a direct auditory relay. Reaching out of its screen space, it groups the audience within the theatrical space, effecting a sort of a condensation of social and

cultural meaning in framing them through a specific address. The spectator who is born out of the dynamic of this aural perspective has no fixity of location, but embodies the immanent space of the darkened theatre, existing in a dialogic relation with the voice-over. It is an aural cocooning of each individuated spectator with his own vantage point of exclusive access to the transcendent space. It sets the stage for the opening scene which starts with zooming out from an out-of-focus exterior shot to an interior shot, with the camera tracking back to a mid-shot to reveal the protagonist standing at a window. A woman's voice interjects from off-screen with a question that connects it to the second voice-over, in which the character whom we now recognise as our protagonist has divulged his inability to sleep. The next shot reveals the psychiatrist's office, with the protagonist Ram requesting the doctor to prescribe him sleeping pills. The interaction that follows between them reveals Ram's suffering through his three-month long stretch of insomnia and hints at the reason for this. In terms of editing, the shot/reverse shots establish a dynamic between the two characters, their exchange setting the rhythm of the cuts, structuring the flow of the scene. Their exchange ends in a high angle shot where Ram lies down on the couch and proceeds to tell his story in flashback.

The opening scene thus sets the stage for the flashback, which constitutes the main narrative of the story. Shot/reverse shots, eye line matches, graphic matches and cutaways construct a world inside the psychiatrist's office, generating a narrative flow between on-screen and off-screen space which sutures the spectator into the space of the scene. The doctor's off-screen voice at the beginning of the scene can be considered as an extension of the spectator in the theatrical space, appearing as it does at the end of the intimate voice-overs between the screen and the audience. The scene thus constructs a spectator "placed not in the auditorium but as an imaginary figure enmeshed in the very process of narration", as Ravi Vasudevan observes in the context of the universal spectator in the Hollywood tradition (126). Codes of continuity editing heighten the "individual psychic address", centering and re-centering the spectator's body, "sidelin[ing] the space of the auditorium as a social and collective

viewing space” (125).

Moreover, *Nautanki Saala* establishes an air of intimacy with its audience right from the beginning, directly addressing them with a voice-over pitched in an easy, conversational tone, metaphorically gliding down from its vantage point of the screen-space and sliding into the next seat. It then exhorts the audience to extend that intimacy with each other by putting their hands in each other’s pockets. It is an intimacy complacent in the knowledge that no social barriers would be crossed in this transgression of physical space. The voice-over in this case, while setting the tone of the film, also situates the audience in a certain space and frames them within a specific social context. In the implicit denial of any invasion of private space by the act, this narrative technique pulls the audience into one homogeneous whole where everyone is an insider, ‘in’ on the joke being recounted, all invitees to the same party, connected by their admission into the multiplex space and bonded by the familiarity of class. But the multiplex is also a modern phenomenon, its screens competing for attention with window displays of high-end stores in the shopping malls as well as assorted screens that stretch out from the pockets of its patrons to their walls. *Nautanki Saala* acknowledges that screen in each pocket, explicitly asking it to be switched off and requesting a transference of spectators’ attention to the screen space of the auditorium.

The voice-over generates an interconnection between the projected space of the screen and the physical space of the multiplex, interpellating the spectator into a specific experience and organisation of cinema-going. Running alongside the opening screen credits of the film’s digital and media partners, the first voice-over marks a phenomenological shift in the nature of the cinematic space, effecting a change in the cinematic experience. It reverses the gaze between the screen space and the physical space of the multiplex – directing attention to the material setting where the audience sits as a cultural and social configuration, and to the forms of power that bind together all these elements of cinematic exhibition. Following the disjunction between the aural and visual tracks, the second voice-

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over then switches from the third-person to a self-revealing first-person narration, creating an ironic frisson. The intimacy created by the voice-over is thus carried over into the opening scene of the protagonist Ram Parmar on his therapist's couch.

Thus, following on from the direct address of the voice-overs, which heighten the audience's self-awareness of the shared auditorium, the opening scene sets up a narrative that switches to a privatised sphere for the spectator. It is a transference of emphasis from a collective social space to one that highlights the screen space, transforming the spectator consciously positioned in the space of the auditorium into one "enmeshed" in the process of narration. The film segues to an intimacy that marginalises the collective viewing space of the multiplex auditorium in favour of the narrative universe of the screen. The camera always remains on the level of the human eye (barring the high-angle shot at the end of the opening scene) framing the scene horizontally, its shot distance, angle and movement imagining its spectator seated not close upfront but at a composition point further away. Sangita Gopal has already posited the question as to whether the Indian middle class spectator, traditionally seated at the back of single screen theatres was conditioned to receive the image less viscerally than the frontbenchers, and therefore was always receptive to a less heightened, more detached, realist mode of narration (130). In today's multiplexes, a non-segregated homogenised spatial layout recreates that physical distance from the screen that its middle class audience always experienced from the back of the single screen theatres.

Vivian Sobchak has said that the filmic experience involves a negotiation of dynamic and directionally reversible multiple visions belonging to both the film and the spectator. Born out of this transitive relationship between film and spectator, "each materially embodied and distinctly situated, yet each mutually enworlded", is a "third, transcendent space", in the interstices of which previously hidden and imperceptible meanings emerge (25). In *Nautanki Saala*, the voice-over's attempt at forging a direct relation with the audience creates a specific kind of encounter, an engagement between film and

the viewer in this 'third, transcendent space'. The embodied eye of the film, in consciously addressing and integrating the viewer into its own lived-space, effects a dynamisation of the physical space of the theatre that situates the screen image in a specific position in this "transcendent space", forging a spatial paradigm that integrates the assembled body within its narrative framework. This exchange of perception and expression within the embodied vision of both film and spectator constitutes the introductory cinematic experience of *Nautanki Saala*.

The voice-over in its direct address thus allows the spectators to reflect on their own viewing experience by making them aware of themselves from the perspective of the film. But it also serves to code and organise, at the same time, the social space of the multiplex. In its easy direct address, denial of any hierarchical or class barriers, and secure knowledge of the presence of a mobile phone in each audience member's pocket is the acknowledgement of the homogenized exclusivity of this audience and its social and cultural codes. The eye of the multiplex film thus brings the multiplexed body into existence and configures it within a specific framework of consumerist orientation and social exclusivity. But concomitant with the eye of the film, the assembled body also arranges to *structure* itself in a specific sense of collectivity and community imbued with imaginary qualities. Arjun Appadurai, borrowing from Raymond Williams, talks of locality as a "structure of feeling", as distinct from its spatial or scalar dimension. He suggests that the production of social forms can be considered from an experiential angle, and seen as the ability of neighbourhoods and communities situated within "multiple imagined worlds" spread around the globe to use imagination as "a collective tool for the transformation of the real, for the creation of multiple horizons of possibility" ("The Right to Participate"). Appadurai's suggestion of how specific groups of actors can envision, project, design and produce whatever kind of local feeling they wish can be used to look at how spectatorial practice also injects this shared ground of film experience with a "structure of feeling", contributing to bringing the multiplexed body into existence, making it *visible*. The production of this multiplexed body thus is

as much a work of the imagination as a work of material social construction. Spectatorial journeys originating from the city outside congregate inside the multiplex, where the architectural space mediates and structures bodily experience. The material space frames and organises, separates and unites, prohibits and facilitates a particular encounter with the assembled body, altering and conditioning experiences of reality. This encounter with the multiplex space articulates specific embodied and existential meanings effecting a catalysis whereby the collective imagination of the assembled body envisions and produces whatever feeling they wish to produce.

Unlike Ram Parmar, who casually introduces himself to the audience while the production credits keep rolling, *Commando's* Karanveer Singh Dogra is introduced in a deliberate manner. In a nine-minute pre-title sequence, the heroic qualities of *Commando's* eponymous protagonist are foreshadowed in a visual strategy that maximizes his presence on every level of screen space, whether spatial, narrative or performative. The narrative resolutely remains centred on him, his physical presence filling up most of the screen space. In this introductory sequence, a succession of events is encapsulated in a compressed narrative that employs cross-cutting and a temporal ellipsis to accommodate incidents that take place across diverse spaces and time. The visual indicators of this narrative sequence set the tone for the rest of the film, the screen space creating a milieu which serves as the topography for the showcasing of its protagonist's heroism – a hero whose cinematically heightened, almost supra-human persona exists in a sort of a counterpoint to the oppressive spaces round him.

*Commando* begins with the news of an Indian Army helicopter crash due to bad weather near the Chinese border during a routine trip leading to the capture of Commando Karanveer Singh Dogra by the Chinese Army. This is conveyed through a dialogue between two army officers, who express anxiety and apprehension regarding Karanveer's fate after his capture as a suspected spy. The scene cuts to Karanveer being interrogated in a Chinese prison cell, and cuts back to an Indian television newscast reporting the escalation of tension between the two countries as China charges India with

espionage. The scene cuts again to the Army officer requesting help from a government minister to extricate Karanveer from this situation by intervening with China and supplying them with internal flight logs to prove he is not a spy. The minister refuses to intervene, citing the complicated intricacies of international diplomacy and instead asks the officer to delete all logs and deny the existence of Karanveer altogether. The rest of the sequence employing a temporal ellipsis tracks Karanveer's imprisonment and torture after his abandonment by the Indian government, up to his daring escape from his captors.

This introductory sequence contains a suggestion of the major tropes that structure *Commando*, from the representation of 'India' as a complex space where oppressive regimes wield hegemonic power to the transformative possibility vested in an individual. The spatial iconography that underpins these thematic concerns conveys a corresponding sense of menace and unease, the shadowy amorphousness of its frames suggesting a sense of unfamiliarity as well as spatial confinement. The narrative spine of this introductory sequence is held together by a spatial organisation of scenes that mostly plays out in interior spaces like corridors, staircases, prison cells and office chambers, juxtaposed with a few exterior scenes which stage the protagonist in triumphant action in a natural environment. These spatial repetitions and variations create a visual symmetry, the contrast of interior and exterior, light and dark connoting entrapment and freedom, of opposing forces struggling for control. This sense of entrapment and limitation is enhanced by spatial compositions that favour the presentation of figures and faces in close-ups and mid-shots as well as camera movements which track towards the characters, tightening the frame progressively and directing the spectator's attention to the actors' faces, highlighting the tiniest flicker. It is a spatial design that explicates a discomfort with interpersonal spaces, suggesting entrapment and lack of vantage points.

*Commando's* tension-filled introductory narrative laid out within a spatial arrangement designed for maximum visual impact, makes it a part of the long line of action genre films that had been the staple

of single screen theatres in the 70s and 80s. This packaging of thrills geared towards the frontbenchers, who constituted the dominant demographic of the single screen theatres, followed its own textual strategies and visual codes, producing a certain unboundedness of meaning. Commenting on Hindi cinema's stylistic conventions, Jyotika Virdi observes that it is "in complete disjunction from everyday reality" and that within the mise-en-scene of costumes, sets, exotic settings, songs and dances, "the non specificity of address *distances* it from "authentic" portrayals of Indian life" (2). But this distancing is paralleled by an address that is geared towards the spectator sitting in the front and rear stalls, and what Virdi terms as *distancing* is actually a part of the psychodynamically charged visual and spatial strategy that draws that particular audience demographic closer into the "transcendent space" (Sobchak 24).

Sobchak describes "transcendent space" as that born out of the dynamic and transitive correlation between the "two embodied acts of vision at work in the theater". This 'vision' (along with the other senses) is an act occurring in the body and in a world, its 'address' denoting its origin as well as its destination of viewing. The film experience not only represents and reflects upon the prior direct perceptual experience of the filmmaker but also presents the reflective experience of the film's perceptual and expressive existence qua film, transcending the filmmaker to constitute and locate its own address. Therefore, the viewer *interprets* and *signifies* the film as experience, doing so through the same structures and relations of perception and expression that inform the indirect representational address of the filmmaker and the direct presentational address of the film. In this modelled co-relation that exists between film and viewer, the filmic structures of embodied existence are appropriated and incorporated into the performance of the viewer (21-26). In *Commando's* spatial design, its structures of direct experience are replicated in the shared cinematic space of the theatre.

In his analysis of the social films of the 1950s Ravi Vasudevan points out how modes of staging like the tableau or the iconic framing, arising out of a host of Indian aesthetic and performance traditions,

effected a frontality of address at a 180-degree plane to the camera, which still lingers in commercial cinema (110-111). The filmic techniques that structure the micro-narration of *Commando's* introductory sequence also foreground the faces and bodies of its characters frontally, centering them in the middle of the frame along the axis of action, while framing them in a series of close-ups and tight mid-shots. Camera angles and movement exaggerate volume, maximizing the visual impact of the images. The expansion of these effects is more pronounced for spectators seated upfront in a single screen theatre than in the elevated levels at the back. In his analysis of the psychophysics of theatrical space James E. Cutting arrives at two deductions from his observation of the image distortion that happens en route from the projector to the screen to the viewer's eye, at various positions of the seating arrangement within an exhibition space (552). He deduces that from a viewpoint perpendicular to the image plane, moving closer to the image creates a compression of the depth dimension of virtual space (analogous to looking through a telescope), while moving away from the image creates expansion in depth (analogous to looking through a microscope). The second transformation he deduces is caused by a change in viewpoint parallel to the cinema screen itself. From a front row seat on a side aisle, the screen might offer a perspective transformation, with the vertical edge of the near side of the screen appearing almost 40% to 50% larger than the far edge (553-555). Cutting's research aims to understand why spectators still seem to enjoy pictures viewed from non-composition points, and how perspective transformations are dealt with by the spectator without diminishing or compromising their cinematic appreciation. Cutting's deductions open interesting lines of inquiry in the context of the spatial politics of the single screen and its screen images.

The filmic techniques deployed in *Commando's* pre-title sequence – from shot distance and angle to movement and lighting – signal how it envisages its character/spectator dynamic within the action space. Its tight-knit spatial design structured by close shots maximizing the illusion of volume and shallow depth of field imagines its spectator seated in relative proximity to the screen. The loss of

depth that screen proximity causes is integrated into the visual strategy of its screen space, its camera angles and movement adding height and volume to its frames. The arrangement of the screen space is thus organised to address this “transcendent” spectator, summoned into hypothetical existence by its visual structure, seated at the composition point of the front stall.

Thus the screen in conjunction with the theatrical space forges a dynamic between intimacy and distance that is layered and complex. *Commando*'s filmic techniques, addressed to spectators seated upfront, draws them into the action space, keeping alive the primacy of the collective viewing space in the spectatorial experience. *Nautanki Saala* by starting off with an intimate address to the audience, shifts the self-reflexivity that gave preeminence to the theatrical space and reverts back to the universe of its screen space, constructing a screen dynamic that positions and binds the spectator within the narrative flow of the screen that sidelines the consciousness of the collective viewing space of the multiplex.

### **Cinematic Spaces**

In evoking its screen space *Nautanki Saala* uses frames of reference that are familiar to its audience, its spatial references corresponding to the cultural imaginary of the urban space outside. City streets, apartments, theatres, restaurants, florists, hairdressing salons, the suburbs structure its screen topography, markers of contemporary city life that are crucial to its narrative. Set in Mumbai, the film aims to create an authentic representation of the city, its exteriors and interiors reflecting its overall space and facilitating the unfolding of the narrative. The action takes place across varied locations, the theatrical stage of the massive art deco theatre where Ram's play is being staged, the apartment that he shares with his girlfriend Chitra, the florist shop owned by Mandar's ex-wife and assorted restaurants where crucial turns in the narrative take place. The interior spaces are fairly detailed and try to evoke the lived spaces of the city and connote the social status of its characters, and the exterior sets

incorporate architectural markers and landmarks authenticating geographical space. As a context for the unfolding of the story, *Nautanki Saala*'s spatial design evokes a middle-class Mumbai, familiar to its multiplex audience, its décor coding the screen space within a specific social and cultural framework.

As an action film, specifically targeted to present-day single screen theatre audiences, *Commando* works within an action-oriented focus that does away with narrative embellishments. The physical energy of its lead imparts value, the screen space creating a milieu which serves as the topography for the showcasing of its protagonist's heroism, its narrative strategies tailored to the configuration of its audience. The film's action takes place across a wider expanse of space, its geography stretching out from the eastern fringes of the Indo-China border to an Indian Army base in north India. It is an expanse that takes in a vast area, including foreign spaces, its spatial imagination unrestricted to any one specific location. The film's action, although set in a small town, imagines an India that stretches from its farthest borders to its heartland, its narrative unfolding in an expansive territory that imagines a nation. The spatial iconography that underpins this imagination includes a combination of exterior and interior spaces – from army bases, prison cells, office chambers, domestic spaces to courtyards, streets, bus depots and town squares, extending out to the open natural spaces of dense jungle. As an action film, specifically targeted to present-day single screen theatre audiences, *Commando* narratively and stylistically harks back to the conventions of the action film genre, carrying its generic memory in its spatial cues. Its oppressive and alienating domestic spaces connect with harsh and overpowering exterior spaces that restrict and oppress the characters who inhabit them.

A reading of the spatial dimensions of the two films reveals different spatial derivatives and differing practices of its users. The two films embody two opposing conceptions of space – urban and rural, traditional and modern, local and global – each film utilizing its locale as a defining aspect of its geo-historical cinematic context. *Nautanki Saala* is a film preoccupied with contemporary city life and the

psychosocial effects of modernity on urban living. *Commando*'s architectural space and social framework, far removed from the urbanity of *Nautanki Saala*, is centred on the desolate topography of an oppressed town in the hilly terrain of northern India. While *Nautanki Saala* articulates a narrative that centres around more on interior and domestic spaces, *Commando* articulates a narrative that takes place more in the bleak open spaces than in the interiors. In *Commando*, even the interiors do not function as safe, intimate and familiar domestic spaces, but rather serve as alienating spaces that restrict and oppress their characters, especially its female ones.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Peter Wollen has argued that spaces become places in cinema when they are concerned with identity and history, as this encourages in the spectator a dynamic interaction with cinematic place that is more kinetic than contemplative (199-215). In *Nautanki Saala*, Mumbai emerges as a familiar space of heritage buildings, modern apartments, five-star hotels and restaurants, glitzy salons and flower shops and open public paces. The spatial aesthetics of the mise-en-scene provides a visual field that maps out Mumbai as an authentic space, drawing on genuine topographies and visual cues that could be easily processed by the urban viewer. As with the flashback in the beginning of the film which sets up the chance encounter that forms the narrative crux of the film, nocturnal Mumbai with its beautiful art deco heritage buildings, grand theatres and wide open leafy streets provides a viewing experience of a familiar urban territory open to the mobile gaze and chance encounter. The cinematic experience of the modern city is thus diegetically laid out by its mise-en-scene, as for instance, the façade of the art deco theatre where Ram is putting on his play blends in with the authentic heritage buildings and street spaces of contemporary Mumbai. In the balcony scene that follows a little later, when Ram mistakenly thinks that the suicidal Mandar has jumped off the balcony, the expedient use of the city as the backdrop complete with high-rises and glowing billboards helps to authentically integrate the set into the city, providing an architectural existence to the narrative place. The journey which Ram and Mandar undertake from Mumbai to Pune to meet Mandar's

grandmother establishes and reinforces that sense of geographical authenticity. It adds a sense of realism as the camera transitions from an interior space to an exterior space of night-time Mumbai and onto the neighbouring city of Pune, the journey evoking a familiar space corresponding to the cultural imaginary of its audience. The spaces thus constructed are visually and emotionally accessible corresponding to the spaces outside the multiplex.

*Commando's* spaces are denotative as well and the visual intensity of its spaces creates an affective and narrative correspondence between character, place and action. From the Indo-China border outpost of Lepcha to the hilly terrain of Dilerkot, the locales are key elements in the structural organisation of the film, but no matter the level of verisimilitude, they acquire an abstraction, a specific affect which conveys a darkness, wildness and hopelessness. The desolate topography, the austere housing structures, the basic infrastructures of small-town life and the surrounding wild terrain of deep forest and river convey a world not specific to a particular place, but a kind of an amalgamation of places of small-town India. It is a spatial design where its dark, liminal spaces effects a transportation to a narrative place which is almost exotic in its distance, bringing in a sense of unfamiliarity and confinement. In spite of the specificity of the locales named, like Pathankot Army Base and the Lepcha Border area in China, a sense of placelessness permeates the frame. The place names furnish a frame of reference, but in their indeterminacy they become a sort of an everywhere, their names becoming stylistic features that determine narrative elements rather than a structured frame of reference that comes with its own visual signposts.

This imagining of space in *Commando* is thus predominantly based on an abstraction of familiar spaces culled from all over and reformulated for the purpose of the narrative. It enables a cinematic journey to a conceptually bordered space, exotic in its screen novelty. Though devoid of the 'denotative normalcy' of *Nautanki Saala's* Mumbai, *Commando's* spaces command attention and awe, they have an impact consistent with the depiction of its larger-than-life heroic story. But the narrative

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significance of this self-consciously placeless set determines that we never lose sight of its presence – it assumes metaphorical, symbolic or even character-equivalent status. The narrow by-lanes of Dilerkot town, like its basic town centre and bus depot, are a synecdoche for small-town India. In *Commando*, the very placelessness of its setting gives it familiarity.

*Nautanki Saala* and *Commando: A One Man Army* thus envision two different cinematic landscapes, displaying different narrative strategies in the usage of their cinematic space, employing differing modes of address by which it imagines its ideal addressee. Expressly targeted at different sets of audiences, the two films embody and reflect at many levels the split between the multiplex and the single screen audience. *Commando*'s narrative strategies focus on pure physical action, keeping narrative embellishments to the minimum, as it tells the story of a superhero who single handedly rescues a small town from its powerful oppressors, while *Nautanki Saala*'s narrative is in the telling of an intensely personal story of a man caught in a moral dilemma. Their respective heroes are thus enmeshed in contrasting journeys, articulating a meta-narrative that links to differing concerns and a distinct social identity. Their imaginations encompass different 'Indias', one circumambulating within the perimeter of a metropolitan city, the other expanding to the distant borders and small towns of contemporary India. Their heroes wrestle with demons of differing ilk; Ram Parmar in *Nautanki Saala* is entangled in a struggle largely internal, his moral dilemma externalized in the mythical narrative his stage persona enacts, while *Commando*'s Karanveer battles it out with AK47, a fearful, grotesque-looking villain bearing the moniker of the Kalashnikov automatic assault rifle.

In their conception of their cinematic spaces, the two films thus articulate a world that links in and weaves into the imaginative spaces of their audiences. Hence, in both films, the dynamisation of their screen spaces situate the screen image in a specific aesthetic, with both serving differing spatial paradigms to integrate the assembled body within its narrative framework. *Nautanki Saala*, addressing a multiplexed body, organized within a specific framework of consumerist orientation and social

exclusivity, constructs a spectatorial journey in consonance with the social and cultural codes of its homogeneous middle class audience, evoking frames of reference which are familiar, intimate and corresponding to the cultural imaginary of the urban space outside. Conscious of its exhibition space, it forges a layered intimacy-distance dynamic, its camera imagining its spectator seated not close up front but at a composition point further away, even while its introductory voice-over directly addresses its audience. *Commando*'s heightened narrative is structured within a spatial design devised for maximum visual impact. Its filmic techniques, addressed to the spectator seated upfront draws him into the action space, keeping alive the primacy of the collective viewing space in the spectatorial experience. The spectatorial experience of *Nautanki Saala* and *Commando* thus arises out of the interplay between the screen space and the material space of the theatre, where the phenomenological singularity of the two different exhibition spaces, multiplex and single screen respectively, is implicated in the cinematic text as well as in the collective reception of it.

# 5

## Retrofits and Remakes

### Retrofitting Single Screen Theatres and Remaking its Cinematic Narratives

When the PVR Group, pioneers of multiplexes in India, started building multiplexes, they began by retrofitting four of their existing single screen theatres in Delhi. In renovating Priya, their old single screen theatre in South Delhi into a multiplex, PVR engaged Morphogenesis Architecture Studio, whose approach to the project was to dismantle the “alienating space” of Priya, then predominantly playing morning shows, and open out and extend the front of the cinema “from the popcorn stand in the lobby to the *paanwallah* outside” (Taneja “The Multiplex Makers”). Architect Sonali Rastogi of Morphogenesis, talking about the transformation of Priya’s space, evokes the idea of “urban renewal” in effecting this extension of the cinema space into the city. The architectural makeover that accompanies Priya’s transformation into PVR Priya, instead of being just a structural upgrade of an older edifice by a more sleek and shiny modernist structure, now becomes part of the more expansive idea of “urban renewal”, influencing and engaging with the larger imaginative space of the city and its inhabitants. While the inside is entirely revamped, with digital screens and a new spatial layout, the exterior space is also reconfigured in tandem, opening out from the lobby inside to a paved promenade

outside, extending the front of the cinema. This extension achieves a structural flow from the inside to the outside, and envelopes both in this reworking of the old into the new. In Rastogi's opinion, PVR Priya created a social space that "unite(d) love for cinema with the Indian love for conversation and socialization" (Taneja "The Multiplex Makers"). Her point seems to be endorsed by the comment and its attendant 'likes' on the Facebook page of PVR Priya:



Fig. 15. Screen shot of Facebook page of *PVR Priya*, Vasant Vihar, Facebook, 2014

In this remodelling of the old into the new, from Priya to PVR Priya, the *paanwallah*, the popcorn seller and the audience of the morning shows disappear and are replaced by a socially differentiated audience, partakers of a new culture of consumption and of the new cinematic spectacle unfolding on its screens.

### **The 'Desirable' Audience and their 'Desired' Cinema**

The "desired spectacle" (Taneja "Begum Samru") of multiplexed screens addresses the aspirations of the new transnational, urban, middle class. New narratives unfolding within this space display a diversity of genres, breaking away from the "homogeneity of the all-embracing format of the social film and the masala" (Gopal 3), the staples of the old single screen, and making space for a diverse range of narratives to co-exist simultaneously. Sangita Gopal has coined the term 'New Bollywood' to underline the distinctiveness of the multiplex films and to "challenge the notion that...(the multiplex films are) merely a contemporary reiteration of older forms" (14). Indeed, from the "genre-mixing and

code-switching” of the earliest multiplex films to the more expansive address of the latter multiplex films, the narratives of New Bollywood display “a new arrangement of aesthetic and material elements” that consciously veers away from the heterogeneous product of the single screen to a more “homogenizing middle class one to advertise a wide spectrum of products and subjectivities”. Amongst the smorgasbord of the multiplex menu on offer – from opulent family dramas, self-conscious masala entertainers, low and medium budget indie films, art house films and more – this chapter explores how old Hindi films that were box office hits in their time have been reformatted into a contemporary configuration. In post-liberalisation Bollywood, remakes and sequels of its own blockbuster films have acquired a greater viability and currency within the Bombay film industry. The past is being revived, resuscitated and freshly circulated in new and diverse networks of production and distribution, as globalisation unleashes a new economy of exchange. As the digital boom revives the past, rebirthing it in myriad trends from vintage fashion to retro music, the film object of the past is no longer remote and fixed, but is instead dispersed and disseminated, made available and accessible in the various forms of audiovisual media. Remixed, reworked and remade, the past surfaces in the present, evoking memory and nostalgia, enabling the tracing of a film culture from then to now, in its repackaging of the old into a format of the new.

In contrast to their original versions, remakes exist within a changed production-distribution-exhibition framework and are placed alongside an ensemble of ancillary forces that range from media, technology, leisure, advertising and marketing, to audience demographics and urban development. The rise of the networked society and consumer culture, the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the media, the emergence of the NRI and the expansion of the diasporic market, the arrival of Bollywood as brand and its attendant tie-ins with the leisure and entertainment industries, all place the remake in a different social and commercial context than its original avatar. The contemporary remake also appears at a time of accelerated transformations in the urban ecology. The built environment that has arisen to

accommodate the needs of the new middle class is reflective of the new aspirations, new accomplishments and expanding reach of this section of the society in the larger world, articulating a changed sense of self, a new way of being in the world. Malls and multiplexes have become the emblems of this new shift, architecturally intervening in an urban landscape, changing metropolitan skylines, instigating fissures along which cities start splintering and reconfiguring, rearranging their surrounding spaces and unveiling within themselves spaces for the new 'global Indian'. The remake is thus staged within this interconnected network of assorted factors that influence its material and aesthetic elements, forging a mode of cinema going that becomes a dynamic multilayered activity for audiences.

This chapter explores the film remake as a concurrent formation alongside the remaking of single screen theatres. Just as old box office hits are remade into a newer version, retrofitted single screen theatres also embody a transubstantiation of the old into the new. In the cinematic re-telling that transforms audience memories of films that played on old analog screens into contemporary versions, the physical space of the theatres provides the tangible backdrop to the intangible ephemerality of the film experience. The structure, nature and organisation of the physical space itself becomes complementary to the film experience, articulating in its design, décor, nature of access and positioning within the urban ecology of the city the changed social and cultural context of cinema-going. Within its plush environment of upmarket concession stands, artful lighting, wall to wall carpeting, polite ushers, comfortable chairs in a raked seating arrangement, the latest projection and audio system, the screen unfolds the "desired spectacle" of the new middle class, new narratives re-fashioned out of the old, colored by the imagination and aspirations of post-liberalisation India. It is the new fantasy space of middle class India (divested of the lumpen figure of the proletariat), with high-priced ticket rates, controlled access and a distribution system that privileges them over the old single screen theatres.

When multiplexes, with their new edifices of chrome and glass, jumpstarted the carving out of these exclusionary spaces within the urban landscape in the late 90s, old single screen theatres which followed suit by opting to retrofit their structures on the multiplex model saw it as an opportunity to prevent themselves from sliding into irrelevance and being saddled with an undesirable marginalised audience. With the mall-multiplex combination coming to proudly stand as an architectural marker of a new urban order and subsequently dominate the cinema exhibition sector, retrofitted single screens also aligned themselves to this urban reconstruction to escape being pushed to the periphery. In linking themselves to the imaginatively designed climate-controlled spaces of a multiplexed India, retrofitted theatres thus succeeded in connecting themselves to the imagination of the new middle class and becoming a stakeholder in the larger process of “urban renewal”. For instance, PVR Priya, in renovating and remodeling itself, managed to reclaim the fantasy space in the imagination of the urban middle class and re-situate itself in a new relationship to the city. Apart from all the structural retrofitting of its internal space, PVR Priya adopted a material strategy of adding a paved promenade that is a structural extension of the lobby inside, enabling its patrons a fluid transition from the inside to the outside, smoothening out any sudden disjuncture between a renovated interior and the noise and movement of the adjacent city space. Besides effecting this phenomenological linkage between the interior and the exterior, it also allowed for a complete visual and spatial reorganization of the outside – making space for its patrons to stroll and amble along, but also artfully accommodating parking spaces and strategically surrounding them with franchised outlets of international fast food, coffee and restaurant chains. In deploying this subtle compositional device, it changed the relation of the exterior to the interior, at once placing its patrons in a structured external space and extending that space as an ‘opening out’ to the city. In this re-designing of its outward appearance, its function and spatial orientation vis-à-vis the city, it initiates and becomes part of the larger changes in the urban ecology of Delhi.

In contrast, the Imperial Cinema of Delhi is a case in point of an old single screen theatre that has been pushed to the fringes. Researching the case of this old single screen theatre and its disappearance from the mainstream, Taneja finds that the so called decline of viewership of Imperial Cinema is not really the decline in occupancy rates (the Imperial maintains a weekly 60 percent occupancy rate) but a remembered decline of the ‘class’ of visitors who used to come to the hall (“Begum Samru”). In delineating the so-called ‘decline’ of Imperial Cinema, Taneja notes how the notion of a ‘desirable’ audience has always been fundamental to the pre-eminence of a fantasy space, whether it was a courtesan’s dancing hall in 18<sup>th</sup> century Delhi or the contemporary multiplex. The new middle and upper class audience who populate the spaces of the multiplexes and fill up the auditorium seats become the privileged consumers of a cinematic menu, their ‘desired’ spectacle served up on the screens of their choice. In the case of the retrofitted theatres, the structural *remake* brings this ‘desirable’ audience to its doors, opening up their spaces for the desired cinematic fare.

### **Architectures of Memory: Mediating Affect**

In re-constructing themselves, both the film remake and the retrofitted theatre thus succeed in inserting themselves into the flow of urban middle class life in contemporary India. Coming into existence amid the fluidly changing urban and cultural landscape, both the remake and the retrofitted hall embody the containment within themselves of contrasting structures, forms, materials and details of the new and the old, suggesting layers of time, and a sense of continuity that connects the past to the present. Both thus set forth an imaginative and emotionally charged process of recollection for audiences, as their original avatars metamorphose to shape shift into the imagination of the middle classes, their co-existence at this juncture of time acquiring a heightened signification.



Fig. 16. Exterior, *PVR Plaza*, Connaught Place, New Delhi, 2011. Photo Credit: *cinexplorer.net*

The retrofitted hall signifies the making of a new India, embodying within its structure the process of this restructuring. In the narrative, mobile experience of place that architecture fosters, the road to the retrofitted cinema hall is layered with a double movement, the memory of old traversals bound to a new material and sensory engagement with the space, setting off a continuous dialogue that sets off the present with the past. On the occasion of the reopening of Plaza (the old single screen theatre at the heart of Delhi owned by PVR) as PVR Plaza in 2004, an article in ‘The Hindu’, one of India’s premier national newspapers, said:

Having reopened this Friday as a single screen auditorium under the PVR banner, the place now dons an all new look at this aimed at bringing back its old glory. Combining the 1950s look and feel with state-of-the-art technology, PVR Plaza is a rare opportunity to get the best of both worlds. (Ghosh “Welcome”)

It is not just a renovated cinema hall, but a site of an architectural redrawing that reframes and reimagines a new way of experiencing cinema. Its remodeled façade, digital screens, acoustic treatment, luminous surfaces and reworked layout make space for a new audience, a new imagination,

a new mode of spectatorship, the affective changes playing out across the expanse of every surface, from its walls to its screens. For the spectator, the effect of finding oneself in this space is one that activates an intensification of past linkages to this space – personal, emotional and historical. But this traversal is also grounded in the present, tied to the new order of things, and provides a renewing of engagement with the narrative peripatetics of the old. The curved staircase, the balcony balustrade, the terracotta mural, the wood paneled doorway extend onto the present to meet and collaborate with multiple screens, reflective surfaces, treated glass and lighting design to generate a space that affects and conditions the experience of the contemporary cinematographic image. It is an encounter at once material and sensory, articulating a specific embodied meaning for the traveller, giving rise to nostalgia and longing but also providing a sense of connectedness to the present.

This same spatial and imaginative itinerary embodied in the architectural experience unfolds in the film remake, as it traces an “itinerary of the imagination” (Bruno “Public Intimacy” 4) while traversing across “the layout of our mnemonic landscape” (4). Filmic memories, while being recollections of the screen imagery, are also agglomerations of feelings of the time and space they were viewed in, of ideas and sensations felt in the experience of going to the cinema – the colour, light, sound and smell of the halls leaving traces on our psyches – all coming together to constitute the layered patina of our cinematic memories. So even while constituting an inseparable “part of our own shifting geography” (5) filmic memories also reveal ties to the place of their occurrence, the spatial fixity of the theatre becoming transmuted in memory as mobilized discourse. Palash Krishna Mehrotra’s reminiscences of the single screen theatres of his boyhood in the small north Indian town of Allahabad in the early nineties brings forth the particular vivacity of his filmic memories:

Allahabad...was an absurd, desolate and violent landscape...in this landscape violent Hindi films with angry young men...had an immediate connect...*Khalnayak* in the summer of 1991...one of the biggest blockbusters...we entered the lower stalls in a frenzy of pushing and

shoving. The hall was packed to beyond capacity... Men walked in and out at will. Sunlight streamed in through the open doors... And almost everyone was smoking a Capstan cigarette... (the hero's) entry was greeted with hooting, whistling and clapping... they showered the screen with coins. There was a lot of noise in general... People passed loud comments and told the on-screen cop Ram to get out of their faces. The loudest cheers were reserved for the scene where... (the hero), a gangster, escapes from jail. (The Big Indian Picture)

But the film experience, apart from the place of its screening and the gaze of the viewer, is also constitutive of the imagination of the screen, entwined within a pattern of exchange of perception and expression with that of the spectator (Sobchak). In its spatial and imaginative re-traversal of the old to remake it anew, the screen also negotiates the composite geography of a double movement, between the old and the new, between now and then. Its vista of moving images mapped out in visual space effect an imaginative re-tracing of the old, setting off an alchemy between the affectively charged memories of the old film and the new cinematic spectacle on screen. Screen memory thus combines with audience memory to enact a filmic traversal of the remake.



Fig. 17. PVR Plaza, Connaught Place, New Delhi, 1952. Photo Credit: *The Hindu*

Memory thus mediates the affect of both remake and the reconfigured cinema hall, by bringing in an awareness of two simultaneous foci – the past and the present – to the experience of cinema going. It becomes a site where stories take place in multiple layers, where in the newness of the present, the past is evoked and reinvented, the reconfigured settling into a new configuration in public memory. An article in *The Hindu* states how the memory of old big banner film premieres is associated with the Plaza:

Regulars remember Plaza as one of the flagship theatres along with Odeon, Sheila and Rivoli that dominated the film scene in the Capital for decades. Apart from being a popular den for Hollywood films, Plaza was also known as the chosen one for premieres of big banner films including those by Yash Chopra that have almost always premiered here. (Ghosh “Welcome”)

By evoking the memory of premieres of big banner films, especially YRF (Yash Raj Films), one of the biggest banners of Bollywood, the retrofitted Plaza of the present becomes an updated extension of its illustrious heritage. YRF still churns out huge blockbusters at the box office, and by underlining its connection with the old Plaza, which first opened in 1933, the new retrofitted Plaza acquires a layered significance. In retrofitting Plaza, the architects at Morphogenesis worked around the original interiors to upgrade it from a 1,000-seater theatre to a refurbished 300-seater single screen cineplex. On completion of an intensive acoustic treatment and an elaborate lighting plan that combined ambient and accent lighting with a variety of fixtures of differing lux levels and colours, this heritage 1930s single screen theatre opened its doors to the public in 2004 as PVR Plaza. As Ajay Bijli, managing director of PVR Cinemas, says: “We wanted to restore PVR Plaza to its former glory and at the same time ensure world-class cinema viewing exhibition. The combination of art deco interiors and pristine white exteriors combined with marble flooring will evoke memories of Imperial India for our patrons” (Ghosh “Welcome”).

Memory is thus inscribed in both material and spatial terms in the site of the cinema hall, turning space into a specific place. It is in the experience of how one approaches or enters a building, in the crossing of the doorway, in the climbing of the staircase and in the view from the window, effecting an intricate layering wherein the subjective experience is entwined with a larger historical one. The materiality of the past is thus reorganized to integrate with that of the present, summoning forth a range of spatial strategies and compositional resources to establish the retrofitted hall in a new dialogue with the city and its inhabitants.

The remake and the retrofitted cinema hall then become not just filmic and architectural makeovers, but also a representation of a particular situation, a cultural and imaginative shift, initiated by the forces of globalisation. In fact, the basic conceptual similarities between film and architecture and the experiential concurrency between the two, heighten the shared symbolism of the remake and the retrofitted hall when placed in the context of the contemporary Indian cultural landscape. Both film and architecture foster a constant and intense involvement and interaction with their surroundings, binding the self with their respective spatial and situational contexts. They both exist within the same experiential paradigm – from the potential fluidity embodied in their very essence (to be remade, remodeled and reshaped), to the nature of their spatial and imaginative traversal, endowing them with the ability to accommodate many stories and many places at once. In fact, Giuliana Bruno traces the lineage of both film and architecture to the art of memory and “its way of linking collection and recollection in a spatial fashion” (“Public Intimacy” 20). Relating Quintillian’s architectural framework of the way memory works – in a mobilized and sequential image-based traversal and re-traversal of site – Bruno finds that memories work the same way as motion pictures and architectural encounters – stemming from similar “narrative, mobile, architectural experience(s) of site” (20). Thus, in the mechanics of their remaking, what turns into the remade film and the retrofitted cinema hall contains what has been erased and what has been made anew at the same time, expressing a dynamic

that is an assemblage of layers of time connected by an emotionally charged traversal.

### **The Permeable Screen: Remaking Old Bollywood into New Bollywood**

The remake engages in a complex way, signaling the transformation of the old into the new, re-imagining the screen in a way that addresses the needs and articulates the desires of a new audience, but its re-engagement is also complicated by the memory of the original which permeates the screen with its presence, complicating the impact of its reception. The remake thus exists in this distinctive spatial and temporal dynamic, where two separate bodies of work are bound together within a densely associative and emotionally responsive field. The focus of this chapter is limited to the remaking of old single screen Bollywood hits into multiplex versions, keeping the dynamics of Hollywood to Bollywood remakes and its narrative of plagiarism outside the purview of this exploration. When seen against the cultural landscape of contemporary India, Bollywood remakes of its own old blockbusters acquire the added resonance of the time and space of its emergence. Post-liberalisation Bollywood is widening its appeal beyond its existent strong diasporic base, with releases and reviews in the mainstream global press and showings at premier film festivals, and its commercial integration into the global marketplace is further solidified with the entry of international production behemoths like 20th Century Fox, Paramount and Disney in production partnerships with local studios.

Sangita Gopal says that post-liberalisation Bollywood's propensity or rather "obsession with remakes...shows a pervasive tendency to cite, exaggerate, and historicize masala aesthetics, thus announcing its break from the lineage" (14). But though remakes of masala films by their filmic restructuring announce a definitive shift in pattern by enacting a self-conscious and ironic representation of the genre, this performance enacts a double movement, announcing a "break from the lineage", while also hooking into the same lineage to re-trace a path to the present. Filmic memories of old Bollywood hits become crucial in the negotiation of its remakes. The majority of the present

multiplex audience is composed of those who watched the old blockbusters, whether as children, young adults or adults from the balcony sections of single screen theatres. Juhani Pallasmaa observes that in the context of the collaged image, as the new settles over the old, it fosters “a dense associative narrative field...where images obtain new roles and significations through the context and dialogue with other image fragments” (*The Embodied Image* 072). This “dense associative narrative field” might as well be applicable to the dynamics of the multiplex remake, where the new and the old exist in a layered assemblage, even though the expression and symbolism of one might be in direct conflict with the other, from the figure of the hero to the representation of public fantasies, from its narrative compulsions to its visual compositions and density. Even though the remake’s text becomes a site of re-drawing keeping with the new economy of consumption, and the new desires and aspirations of its transnational urban middle class audience, memory of the old text still runs as a latent counter-narrative, complicating the relationship between text and viewer.

This chapter takes two remakes, *Don* (2011) and *Khoobsurat / Beautiful* (2014), to explore how the remake re-traces the familiar trajectories of the original single screen blockbuster to transform it into its New Bollywood version, and how the latent counter narrative of the original running as affectively charged memories, re-imagines the new version and stimulates the impact of its reception. Originally made and released during the heydays of the single screen theatres, their re-emergence on multiplex screens via a reworking and repackaging of the old into the new, raises interesting lines of inquiry. While the original *Don* (1978) was an action-thriller helmed by Amitabh Bachchan, the undisputed superstar of the 70s and 80s, the original *Khoobsurat* (1980) was what was termed as a middle class comedy made by a director who specialized in the genre. For the post-millennium multiplex audience, *Don* (2006) and *Khoobsurat* (2014) came not just as remakes, but also as remakes of iconic films that have remained in collective audience memory.

Starring two of the most charismatic actors in Hindi cinema in lead roles, Amitabh Bachchan and

Rekha, both box office successes in their day, the two original films, despite their disappearance from the theatres, continue to live on via their songs and dialogues, film trivia, re-runs on television, the selective re-release of the films to theatrical and video distribution windows, discussions in the popular press, and on websites and discussion forums. Besides, the cult status of actors like Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha also ensures that the films continue to circulate in popular memory. On the occasion of *Don*'s release in 2006, rediff.com said:

It (*Don*, 1978), airs on television every other day; video stores report a run on copies. It is (*Don*, 1978), at one time, the most watched movie of recent days and the most eagerly awaited film of the year (*Don* 2006)...and an entire generation born after the cult classic hit the screen, queues up in theatres and logs on to the net for advance bookings. (Sen, Panicker "Farhan, his Dad and the Don")

The canonization of the films provided the commercial impetus for their remaking, as it offered a sort of financial guarantee in pre-selling it to an audience already in possession of a "narrative image" of the original story. Repetition and novelty was thus manoeuvred into the same package, as a familiar narrative was embellished with new developments.

## Old But New: Mobilizing Audience Memory in *Don: The Chase Begins Again* (2006)

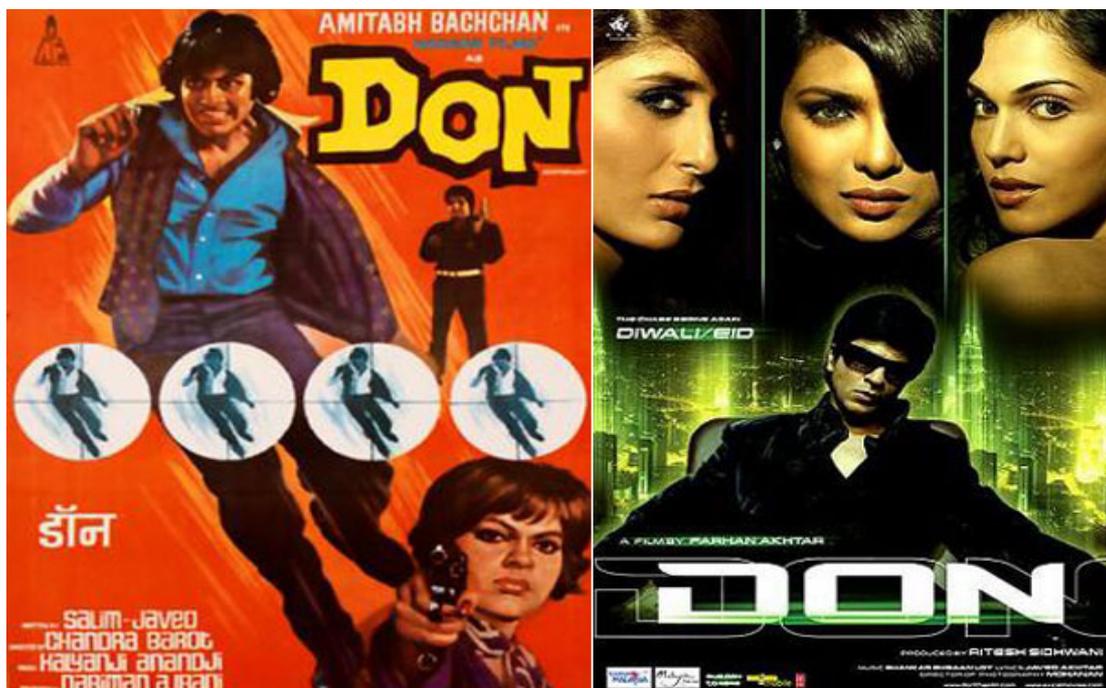


Fig. 18. Film Posters for *Don* (1978) & *Don: The Chase Begins Again* (2006)

In an interview to rediff.com as part of the pre-release of the film, Farhan Akhtar, the director of *Don's* remake, posited his film as a tribute to the original, “not just to that film, but to that time” (Sen, Panicker “Farhan, his Dad and the Don”). But then again, he also asserted that *Don* is “an entirely new film” explaining that the previous “point of reference for Don, the character, is not going to be applicable to this Don, because this is a different character. He may say the same lines, but he is not the same Don...because they are two different movies that happen to begin with a common premise” (Sen, Panicker “I am not shying away”). By ‘different’, Akhtar is referring to the twist at the end of his film, which completely subverts the central premise of the original plot and its moral centre. Akhtar therefore leverages popular memory to buttress his version of the film, but again uses the same audience memory to conjure a maximum effect to his dramatic twist to the original plotline. Akhtar’s contention that *Don: The Chase Begins Again* (2006) is “an entirely new film” is problematic, considering that the main content in his version is a representation of an earlier film, but his ‘twist’

does change the moral universe of the film, creating a layered relationship between the text and the viewer, between a memory of the original hero as one who triumphs over the villains, and the remake's version where the hero was never a hero in the first place.

Chandra Barot's *Don* (1978) narrates the story of a gangster on a run from the police. It starts off with a title sequence of a striking red background on which plays out a montage of fight scenes and chases from the film accompanied by a dynamic title track. *Don* is the story of a gangster who dies and is replaced by his street-smart lookalike, Vijay, with only the Deputy Superintendent of Police D'Silva privy to this secret. This is because D'Silva wants Vijay to infiltrate Don's gang and help him capture and arrest all the gang members. Vijay agrees to impersonate Don and infiltrate his gang, in return for D'Silva's help in educating his two foster children. But D'Silva's sudden death while leading a police raid in Don's den leaves Vijay in the lurch, locked into his impersonation as Don, as D'Silva was the only person who knew Vijay's secret and could have vouched for his real identity. The second half of the film has Vijay trying to prove his innocence, even as he is on the run both from the police and the gang members who come to know his real identity. The film ends with the capture of the kingpin of the gang, Vardhan, and the establishment of Vijay's innocence. Amitabh Bachchan, the superstar of that time, plays both Vijay and Don, and this dual visual economy of the same actor playing both hero and villain serves to provide an added edge to the polarities of good and evil within the moral universe of the film.

Akhtar's remake reinforces as well as subverts the original in crucial ways, his version mapping the complexities of the shifting social and cultural ethos of the commercial Hindi film landscape. As he says in the interview, "The character's dilemma is the same, the plot is the same, the conflict is the same, but what transpires across all of that is different" (Sen, Panicker "I am not shying away").

Akhtar retains the chronological order of the original plotline of a criminal on the run from the police, his secret death, and then the infiltration of his gang by his lookalike who is a police informer. He

retains the original names of all the characters, and also retains or reworks key dialogues, songs and characters. But his remake reveals at the end that the infiltration of the gang by Don's lookalike never really happened, as Don was pretending to be Vijay all along, with the covert assistance of D'Silva, who was actually Don's mole in the police department. The erasure of Vijay's role changes the moral universe of the film, obliterating the earlier polarity of good and evil, and replacing it with an anti-hero, or even a villain as the centre of its new unambiguously dark universe. As Akhtar states, "It is always fascinating to see how a twisted mind works. We see good people on the screen all the time...they are not multi-dimensional...But to have a mind that can keep changing, to deal with a mind that is dark, to create that kind of character and then to tell his story, that is really fascinating" (Sen, Panicker "I am not shying away").

In deleting Vijay's role and the heroism that the character brought to the moral universe of the film, the remake instead becomes a singular portrait of a "twisted mind", as Farhan Akhtar describes the protagonist of the new *Don*, (Sen, Panicker "I am not shying away"). He is marked by greed and cruelty, with a penchant for fast cars, the latest gadgets, and a transnational lifestyle that sees him flit from Kuala Lumpur to London to Dubai. In place of the original's explicit moral stance and delivery of catharsis for the audience with the hero's eventual triumph against all odds, a celebratory, even adulatory, air surrounds the protagonist's exploits in the remake. He is never caught by the police, managing as he does to always stay one step ahead, leading to an open-ended conclusion ready to be followed by sequels (Akhtar made *Don 2: The King is Back* in 2011 and has plans of making *Don 3*). The narrative universe is thus radically reconfigured in this contemporary re-imagining of the original. As Akhtar explains, "...you realise after seeing the film that your point of reference for Don, the character is not going to be applicable for this Don...by the end it is a completely different film, so you forget to compare... You come out without thinking of the original movie – in that sense your point of reference has changed. You don't get into comparison, because they are two different movies

that happen to begin with a common premise” (Sen, Panicker “Farhan, his Dad and the Don”).

Akhtar’s fervent insistence in underlining the difference between the original and his remake acquires some signification in light of the fact that the original *Don* was scripted by his father Javed Akhtar, one half of the immensely successful scriptwriting duo Salim-Javed, whose scripts gave a new direction to Hindi cinema in the 1970s. They heralded the anti-establishment ‘angry young man’ films of Amitabh Bachchan whose success continued till the late 80s, anointing the actor as the biggest superstar of Hindi cinema. In the joint interview that Farhan and Javed give prior to the film’s release in 2006, Farhan says that his rationale for remaking the original *Don* stems from it being a very modern film that was much ahead of its time, fitting “very easily into a contemporary space”, even as his father Javed ripostes: “I see what Farhan’s point is, and it’s totally valid. But...as a writer I don’t have a problem with *Don*, so why would I want to remake it?” (Sen, Panicker “Farhan, his Dad and the Don”).

Even though Farhan’s insistence can be seen as a desire to carve out his cinematic identity as distinct and separate from his scriptwriter father, and on the face of it, he wishes the audience to “forget” about the original, audience memory of the original is not only crucial to the remake’s identity to set it apart from being another contemporary action caper, but more importantly, it is in the remembered erasures in the remake’s text and the juxtapositions that arise therein that the remake achieves its desired effect. In fact, what Farhan Akhtar actually wants is for the audience to remember the erasures that he effects in the remake, because the value of what has been added is only relative to what has been erased. The impact of the ‘twist’ that *Don* (2006) achieves with the deletion of Vijay’s role is only possible because of the remake’s conviction of the original’s persistence in audience memory. Audience knowledge of the original, of Vijay’s struggle and ultimate triumph against the adverse circumstances stacked against him, is used to contrive the shock effect of the remake’s complete erasure of Vijay from the narrative. Audience awareness effects a juxtaposition between his absence and the memory of

his presence and it is in this contrast that the remake acquires its value and its leverage.

Audience memory is thus used as a malleable tool in the service of the remake, from the subversion of the original plotline to the summoning of an all-star cast. The latter enables the star-narrative to engage and reinforce a connection with audience memory of the original, even fashioning an extra-textual narrative that circulates beyond the text in the service of the remake. The original *Don*, released in 1978, was a blockbuster success at the box office, driven by the high velocity star power of then reigning superstar of Hindi cinema Amitabh Bachchan. Bachchan first emerged onto the scene in 1972 with *Zanjeer/The Chain* (Prakash Mehra), a surprise hit, following two years later with the massive box office successes of *Sholay/Flames of the Sun* (Ramesh Sippy 1975) and *Deewar/The Wall* (Yash Chopra, 1975). As Valentina Vitali observes: “With the success of these three films, the Javed Akhtar–Salim Khan script became a ‘formula’ – a template that infused star value into Amitabh Bachchan by buttressing his figure with the plots, diegetic figurations, and choreographies” (193) that reaped phenomenal returns at the box office. Bachchan’s star power marked the cinema of the 70s and 80s, with his films interweaving his star persona with the figure of the action hero as urban outlaw. It brought an unprecedented “degree of integration of star value with narrative...in the Hindi cinema” (Prasad 133), making the formulaic narrative patterns that framed his star status mediate “a new, post-1960s juncture of Bombay cinema as a part of the Indian economy” (Vitali 193). The 1970s was also the period when fanzines and the film press started a concerted effort “to link cinema to adjacent consumer economies like fashion, cosmetics, fitness, and body-building through promotions, contests, and the visual and verbal overlap between story and advertising content” (Gopal 13).

In fact, the 70’s foreshadowed the contemporary scene in its integration of cinema and many ancillary sectors like advertising, marketing, retailing, mobile communications and others in the entertainment industry (13). *Don’s* remake employs various brand endorsements, product placements and tie-ins to make it more marketable, adding to its dominant consumerist ethos. And just as the original *Don*

framed itself around the phenomenal star value of its leading man, the remake too employs the value of the star-narrative, mobilizing high velocity star power in the service of its brand. In casting Shah Rukh Khan, the present superstar of the Bombay film industry in and as *Don*, the remake signaled its own importance as a star vehicle. At the same time, it also underlined Shah Rukh's superstar status, as the rightful inheritor of the Don legacy. Media reports of alleged rivalry between Bachchan and Khan shaped public perception of Khan's superstar status, as the rightful inheritor of the iconic role. Khan's star power thus became the driving force of the remake's brand, just as the original rode high on Bachchan's stardom. This transference of the Don legacy within a star narrative enables Akhtar to combine audience memory and star power to effect a direct line from the original to his remake. In fact, Akhtar's over-emphasis in denying any comparison between the two superstars obliquely underlines the direct connection that star narrative effects in audience memory: "No one has come to me and said this was better or that was better; Shah Rukh was better or Mr. Bachchan was better" (Sen, Panicker "Farhan, his Dad and the Don").

But *Don* (2006) also involves itself in a larger star-narrative, expanding it beyond its leading star to include other actors. Top-rung stars play all the leading characters by their original names, evoking memory and nostalgia and inviting comparisons between the original stars and the ones in the remake. Akhtar himself draws similarities between Helen and Kareena, two actors, who respectively played the same role of the femme fatale in the original and in the remake: "she (Helen) had the ability to wear whatever you put her into and still look sophisticated, dignified; she had that innate sense of dignity about her. Kareena has that same quality...a certain innate sophistication she has...she has the knack of being able to carry off almost anything without ever looking vulgar" (Sen, Panicker "You'll never think"). The figure of the stars, as the site of audience memory and nostalgia, thus becomes crucial in this reconfiguration of the original into a remake.

The mobilisation of audience memory thus becomes crucial to the viability of the remake, because it is

in the persistence of the counter narrative of the remembered film that Akhtar's selective engagement with the basic premise of the original gains value. He marks his version with the unforgettable elements of the original, serving as memory grooves around which he pivots his re-worked narrative. As Akhtar clearly states: "When I started writing it, the first thing that I did was write down all the things that I remember very clearly, as highlights from the original *Don*. All of us have such mental lists, points of reference – so when someone sees the film he has to go, thank god, that bit that I loved in the original is there" (Sen, Panicker "Farhan, his Dad and the Don"). From the funk-infused title track accompanying the opening credit sequence and other popular songs from the original soundtrack, to the names of the characters and the protagonist's iconic line, "Don ko pakadna mushkilhi nahin, namumkin hai" (It is not just difficult to catch Don, it is impossible), it is around these remnants of the original film in collective memory that the remake weaves itself around. Thus even if Akhtar's *Don* moves out from the original's hyper local Mumbai setting to that of Kuala Lumpur, transporting itself to the glamorous environs of a globalised urbanity, with a villainous protagonist who is the antithesis of the original's hero, the remake's tagline does not forget to mention that 'the chase begins *again*'.

Manju to Mili: Trajectory of the ‘Middle Class Comedy’ in *Khoobsurat/ Beautiful* (2014)



Fig. 19. Film Posters for *Khoobsurat* (1980) & *Khoobsurat* (2014)

Shashanka Ghosh’s remake of the original *Khoobsurat* (1980), in partnership with Walt Disney Studios, reimagines and reworks it on a grander scale, complete with erstwhile royals (royal families were divested of their royal status and other perks like privy purses in Independent India) and their regal accoutrements. The remake’s protagonist, Mili, gets a professional identity, and a makeover that is in keeping with contemporary fashion. Comparing the original’s protagonist with the remake’s, a reviewer noted: “... the prevailing belief was that a young woman who ties her hair in braids and whose wardrobe looks like it has all been custom tailored for her by the neighbourhood Masterji wouldn’t win over today’s youth. That is why the new *Khoobsurat* has as its star the funky Mili, not Manju” (Pal). Prefixed by the Disney logo, and yet a remake of an original film which is marked by its auteur’s signature style and its continuance in collective audience memory, *Khoobsurat* (2014) concocts for itself a transformation by shape shifting into a structure that combines a Disney romance with Bollywood sumptuousness. Thus at one level, *Khoobsurat* is a Disney romance with its heroine

marrying her prince charming and living happily ever after, and on the other, it is a hybrid Bollywood entertainer. But its identification as a remake induces a comparative analysis of it with the original, thus causing an interpretative shift in looking at the film.

In the original *Khoobsurat*, the protagonist is a young woman, Manju, who goes to stay with her recently married sister. She arrives into a large joint family, bound by the strict discipline imposed by the matriarch of the family. The rest of the family, including the matriarch's husband, her four sons, and her two daughters in law quietly fall in line, are resigned to the strict regulation of their lives, even as they secretly yearn to be free of the claustrophobic regimentation. Manju, free-spirited and fearless, rebels against the strict rules of the family by deliberately breaking the rules and standing up to her sister's mother-in-law fearlessly. *Khoobsurat's* lighthearted comedy delineates with sharp insight the dynamics and value system of upper middle class life in 70s India, its spirited protagonist articulating a desire for change and freedom from the routine set pattern of their lives.

In the recycling of the original to deliver a contemporary mass entertainment package, this 'middle class cinema' of the 70s is remade into a multiplex entertainer, its comedic realism converted into an aspirational fairy tale. In the original, romance is not central to the plot and the protagonist Manju's falling in love with the third son of the family is a subplot that is subservient to the main plot, which is about Manju's goal to restore normalcy in the highly regimented Gupta household. The remake centralizes the romance plot, making Mili's relationship with the prince the focal point around which the whole narrative revolves, which complements the brand image of its international co-production partner Walt Disney Studios.

Mili, the protagonist of the remake, is also on a mission to change the status quo like her character in the original, but she is positioned as someone who marries a prince and becomes a princess and gets her Happily Ever After. To effect this transformation the remake jettisons the middle class milieu of

the original film in favour of a lavish and grandiose setting of a royal palace in Jaipur, replacing the large upper middle class family with a royal family with its erstwhile king, queen and prince. The free spirited protagonist of the original also gets a makeover, metamorphosing into a brash physiotherapist who falls in love with the prince. The dynamic of middle class life in 70s India that the original deftly portrayed with gentle humour and a lightness of touch, is replaced by an ostentatious fairy-tale like setting and characterisation that escapes the layered realism of the original. This change in setting and characterisation completely alters the spirit of the remake, as it preoccupies itself with a sandstone palace, ornate décor, and an erstwhile royal family, the Rathores, who maintain their lifestyle by buying up forts to make heritage hotels. Mili's entry into the royal household as a physiotherapist for the invalid king upsets the balance of the royal household. Her goofiness is out of place in the decorum-ruled royal palace, but she makes the king walk again, falls in love with the prince and marries him in the end.

*Khoobsurat* (1980) embodied a certain spirit, very particular to the zeitgeist of the times, elegantly incorporating into its comedic storyline serious political and social concerns of the period. India, during the 1970s, was passing through a time of social and political turmoil in the aftermath of the wars with China and Pakistan, the displacement of the urban poor, and the suspension of civil liberties by the government with the clampdown of the Emergency from 1975-77. Seen against the background of the 70s, the film acquires a parallel meaning in the articulation of its desire to be free from the claustrophobic regimentation of daily life. As Manju, the protagonist, referring to her sister's in-laws, tells her sister: "It's like the Martial Law! How do you live here?" The allusion to the Emergency was obvious and as a critic points out, "To do this (criticize the Emergency) and make it past the censor board back in 1980 is quite an achievement" (Pal). In this context, a lighthearted comedy might seem to articulate a metanarrative about the loss of civil liberties and citizen rights in the late 70s under a repressive government, with its young protagonist, Manju, embodying the desire to fight and change

the oppressive status quo, as she sings: “*Saare niyam chod do, niyam se chalna chod do, Inquilab Zindabad, Inquilab Zindabad*” (*Leave aside all the rules, don’t live your life by the rules, Long Live the Revolution, Long Live the Revolution*).

Hrishikesh Mukherjee, the director of the original *Khoobsurat*, was a doyen of 70s and 80s cinema, displaying a cinematic ethos that was a deliberate deviation from the action thriller masala genre that ruled the box office of the single screen theatres of that time. His “middle class cinema” (Gopal 134) told stories about that section of the audience that sat in the balconies and box seats of the single screen theatres, his protagonists inhabiting not the ‘fantastical’ world of the masala genre but a ‘realistic’ one, their modest dilemmas often reflecting broader social issues. His narratives were simple; the characters of his narrative universe were doctors, lawyers, bureaucrats and salaried office goers, his stories delineating the travails of middle class life of the times with gentle humour, pathos and sensitivity. Mukherjee’s storytelling eschewed high melodrama, flashy settings and larger than life characters, his camerawork was functional and unobtrusive, and his cinema, along with a few other filmmakers of his time like Basu Chatterjee and Rajinder Bedi, charted a course that stayed loyal to its middle class milieu and ethos.

*Khoobsurat*’s (2014) success was dependent on leveraging the instant connection it evokes in audience memory with the original, even as it moulds itself into the standardised Disney template of romantic entertainers. It is within these contradictory impulses that the remake locates itself, as it almost dismantles the narrative framework of the original, but relies on the scaffolding of collective memory to pique audience interest and desire to see the film. Settings, characters and plot contrivances are changed to help *Khoobsurat* (2014) morph into its millennial version but at the same time evoke the nostalgia of simpler times. As the film’s leading lady Sonam, in one of the film’s pre-release interview says: “...where are those simple happy films...that Hrishida made? We wanted to revive the cinema that makes you smile, makes you laugh...makes you believe in all the good things of life” (IANS

“Khoobsurat”). This very cleverly insinuates the remake into that terrain of middle class memory, marked by nostalgia for the kind of cinema that a large section of the present multiplex audience’s parents and grandparents had viewed in the 70s and 80s from the balcony sections of single screen theatres.

In fact, in the remake’s radical shift from the political and social ethos of the original to its Disney-inflected millennial multiplex version, can also be traced the trajectory of the evolution of the middle class in India. 1980s India inhabited a different social, political and economic terrain than the present one. The Emergency was still fresh in public memory, though the general elections in 1978 had democratically elected a new government. With economic liberalisation still more than a decade away, the economy was driven by the tenets of Nehruvian socialism, and the middle class mostly employed in the state controlled public sector companies. The economic reforms of the early 1990s turned this middle class into its main beneficiary, paving the way for their moving on to lucrative private sector jobs, gaining access to a range of services and products that was not available before, and acquiring the financial and social clout to impose its demands on the political debate and focus attention on issues that were beneficial to its own interest. Sociologist Leela Fernandes calls this “new middle class” the product of “a distinctive political and social identity that both represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalisation” (“India’s New Middle Class” xviii). She observes that this “newness” does not involve any “shift in the composition or social basis of India’s middle class”, but rather involves a new “ideological-discursive projection” (“Restructuring” 90). This projection involves a movement from “the tenets of the Gandhian and Nehruvian socialistic vision of India”, from the earlier principles of austerity and state protection, to the current culture of consumption (90). This “structural economic shift” enables

the new middle class as a social group ...to negotiate India’s new relationship with the global economy in both cultural and economic terms; in cultural terms by defining a new cultural

standard that rests on the sociosymbolic practices of commodity consumption and economic terms as the beneficiaries of the material benefits of jobs in India's 'new economy'. (91)

But the emergence of this financially and socially powerful post economic reform middle class has meant that the focus of political debate has shifted from an engagement with the overarching larger issues like poverty or hunger to more of a preoccupation with issues like infrastructure, power, technology and the like. The two versions of *Khoobsurat* explicate this shift, holding up a mirror to this transformation, as the contrast between the original 'middle class comedy' of 1980 and its multiplex remake two decades later illustrates the sea change in the attitudes and preoccupations of its targeted demographic, the middle class. In the trajectory of Manju's transformation into Mili and the milieu she inhabits can be mapped the shifting coordinates of the filmic landscape of India. The ordinariness of Mukherjee's world in the original is transformed into a grander setting of the remake's royal household, the original subtext of political repression no longer relevant and necessary in the remake's globalised consumerist world.

But even while it orchestrates a radical shift from the ethos of the original, subverting its metanarrative to subsume itself into the brand image of its production partner Disney, *Khoobsurat* (2014) still uses the memory framework to evoke interest, knowing very well that it is this aspect which will guarantee a curious audience. Even as Disney makes its first foray into the Hindi film industry with this film, stamping it with its "iconic, fireworks-filled castle" (Sen), and thereby reconstructing the original to fit into its popular though predictable template, *Khoobsurat* (2014) still hooks itself into the collective audience memory of the original. Memory is crucial to the remake's existence, and even though Shashanka Ghosh, the director, is "wearing mouse-ears and colouring neatly within clichéd lines" (Sen), *Khoobsurat* (2014) constructs an elaborate memory framework to channel and shape it for its box office success. Firstly, it positions itself as a contemporary claimant to Hrishikesh Mukherjee's legacy. As Sonam, the film's leading lady and co-producer, says in an interview, "We felt a

lacuna... That space of innocent laughter that *Hrishida's* film once occupied is now vacant... We wanted to revive the cinema that makes you smile" (IANS "Sonam Kapoor"), smoothly aligning the remake with a specific era of Indian cinema and a cinematic legacy that lives on in audience memory.

Secondly, it uses star narrative to mobilize audience memory and nostalgia to actively participate in its reconfiguring of the original. In fact, what makes *Khoobsurat's* case even more interesting is that even though no member of the original star cast is included in the remake, it still employed the star narrative to construct and activate audience memory by rekindling the star value of the leading lady of the original, Rekha, and linking it to the leading lady of the remake, Sonam. Here, the marketing strategy created an extra-filmic narrative that went beyond the customary circuits of the film text, by arranging a special screening of the film for Rekha and publicizing her approval of the remake. Sonam elaborated in an interview: "When I told her about the film (remake of 'Khoobsurat') she gave me her blessings. She is excited about the film" (PTI "Sonam Kapoor").

The film publicity even positioned Sonam, the leading lady of the remake, as being very close to Rekha: "Rekha loves... Sonam... (she) is especially close to Rekha's heart" (Jha), which Sonam promptly corroborates: "I heard Rekhaji loved the film. I know she loves me. She says I'm the daughter she never had" (Jha). The promotional hype thus very cleverly evokes and integrates the star power and aura of the original heroine of the film to construct and activate an extra-textual narrative, thus igniting and mobilizing audience memory in the service of the remake. In a further innovative stunt, the trailer of Rekha's latest film *Super Nani/ Super Granny* (2014) preceded the screening of *Khoobsurat* (2014). This further underlined and made tangible the tracing of a cinematic lineage via a star narrative within the environs of the theatre, binding the original's star and the remake within the filmic experience of its screening. As producer Rhea Kapoor stated: "We are attaching the trailer (of *Super Nani*) and are very excited and happy to do that. It's as if everything has come full circle –

Rekhaji had acted in the original *Khoobsurat* and now, her trailer will be attached to our *Khoobsurat*"

(Upala). In this “full circle”, while *Super Nani* gains some publicity mileage via its evoking of the past star power of its leading protagonist, the remake’s value is amplified by the “attaching” of the original’s star presence, the strategy serving to effect in audience perception a transference of the original heroine’s star identity to that of the remake’s. Furthermore, *Khoobsurat* also has the actor Ratna Pathak reprise a pivotal role essayed by her mother Dina Pathak in the original. This “genetic intertextuality” (Stam, Burgoyne, Flitterman-Lewis 211) also served to pique interest, and film reviews and websites carried this interesting bit of trivia, with critics even favourably comparing her performance with that of her mother.

This mobilisation of audience memory of the original is integral to the commercial viability of the remake, and *Khoobsurat’s* (2014) publicity strategy brilliantly evokes it to situate the audience in a favourable reception to the remake’s text. Being a much loved classic, Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s *Khoobsurat* continues to circulate in public memory via trivia, song, stage performances, YouTube clips, and is even available for downloading from the internet. In strategically collapsing the star value in the two differing bodies of work in a pre-release publicity blitzkrieg, the remake integrates itself with the memory of the familiar trajectories of the original film, even though the former charts a radically different territory than the original in its setting and characterisation. This strategy apparently worked as *Khoobsurat* went on to become a box office hit, collecting USD 2.92 million (INR190 million) in the first week itself (IANS “Khoobsurat”), ultimately grossing \$5.16 million in the box office (Box Office India “Khoobsurat”).

In re-tracing the familiar trajectories of the original single screen blockbuster to remake it into its New Bollywood version, the remake walks the thin line between the past and the present. With memory imparting an associative power to the images, audience re-engagement with the new is inflected with the memory of the old, where meaning is refracted through the prism of the original, even in the case of those remakes that try to completely break away from the original in their narrative invention and

expressive design and articulate a new pattern of representation. Both *Don* and *Khoobsurat* present an interesting synergy of the old and the new, as they reconfigure the original narratives into new patterns of representation. Positioning themselves as “tribute” films, they still selectively engage with the originals, complicating their relationship with the original films. But for both *Don* and *Khoobsurat*, audience memory of the originals was bound by a nostalgic aura of the past, with certain songs, dances, bits of dialogue and even fashion taking on a life of its own in collective memory, independent of the film text itself. In reconfiguring the originals, the remakes had to contend with these expectations of audience memory that continued to circulate in popular culture. Therefore, it was not just the actual films, but the mobilisation of the *remembered films* in audience memory that was critical in the reconfiguration of the originals into remakes. In bringing it to screen, both films illuminate the permeability of the remake’s screen which endows it with the qualities of a film set – a site of constant redrawing, where many stories take place on multiple layers and take the place of memory.

In this positioning itself to a new audience, the film remake stands as a counterpart to that other contemporary architectural remaking – that of the retrofitted single screen theatre. Just as the remake reshapes itself, breaking away from the lineage but hooking into audience memory to reconfigure itself in a new context on multiplex screens, the retrofitted single screen theatre too remakes and relocates itself in a new context and resituates itself in the new urban middle class imagination. The film remake and the retrofitted single screen theatre thus become the indices of the contemporary cultural landscape, each embodying in their reconfiguration a transformation into a ‘desired’ product of the middle class imagination.

## 6

### **The Elsewheres of Collective Desire**

#### Shanghai to Spain

Just as the multiplex has been complicit in the changing of the urban landscape – by reclaiming urban space and actively involving itself in the erasing of old areas and landmarks, in the shrinking or expanding of urban distances, and in replacing old infrastructural and social arrangements – the multiplex screen too articulates a parallel experience of globalised urban modernity, as it pulsates with the energy of a new cinematic landscape. The “symbolic break from the past” that the multiplex architecturally initiates (Athique and Hill 129) within the matrix of the urban landscape, with its bold angular lines defined against the urban skyline, making architecturally explicit that the old structural form of the city is being replaced by a new one, finds resonance in its screens. Not just in introducing the material “break” in the transition from analogue to digital screens, with digital film copies and projectors replacing 35mm prints and analogue film projectors, but also in initiating a definitive shift in the nature of the imaginative landscape that it unfolds for its audiences. In this shift, the screen becomes a conduit for the visible manifestation of a changing world, summoning a range of compositional and choreographic elements to articulate this changing spatial and urban modeling of

the real world.

The contemporary urban landscape is a transformation-in-progress as it is being reclaimed, redrawn and redesigned to recreate it in the more Western model of a commercial society. In designing this spatial reconfiguration of the city, architects talk about “the big leap in thinking” of their clients, their “increased consciousness of quality”, the expansion of the architectural brief from “functionality to aestheticism”, and the awareness of the need for the incorporation of design as an integral aspect of the built environment (Singh “These are Great Times for Architects”). Athique and Hill observe how in this “desire to create global cities capable of bringing together flows of international capital...land for new developments is made “available through “a raft of regulatory changes favour(ing) public-private partnerships and commercially-oriented development projects”, to create “valuable new public space” in urban India. The proliferation of multiplex theatres with massive investments and tax incentives given to encourage their development as a key leisure infrastructure of the New Economy becomes part of this spatial re-engineering of the urban landscape (Athique and Hill 2). The multiplex is thus inextricably intertwined with this narrative of post-liberalisation urban transformation; the quality of space that it shapes, holds and exudes articulates this desire of transformation, of re-creation into the image of the global urban spaces of a western elsewhere, from New York to London to Shanghai. In this its screen also becomes an extension of this desire for transformation, its cinematographic space charged with the frisson of a new geographical imagination, tracing the emerging shape of a new urban landscape, concurrent with this unfolding narrative.

### **The Psychogeography of Elsewhere**

This narrative of the post-liberalisation dream is born out of an imagination that sees, in Arjun Appadurai’s words, “the global as a kind of expansion of the horizon of the local” (“The Right to Participate”). Foucault in his 1967 essay “Of Other Spaces” had evocatively stated that “we are in the

epoch of simultaneity...of juxtaposition...of the near and far...of the side-by-side...of the dispersed...our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein”. In the contemporary landscape of even more accelerated ‘simultaneity’ and ‘juxtaposition’, of connected points and intersections, what Appadurai terms as “the work of the imagination” reaches “multiple scales and spaces and forms and possibilities” (“The Right to Participate”). As the horizons of globality appear through the manifold networks of media and migration, it becomes the material with which the imagination works to infuse and interweave with the spatial and the material, the scalar and the embodied dimensions of local life to produce desired structures of being and feeling. It assumes tangible shape in the angular lines of the transnational architecture that appear across the vista of the urban landscape and unfolds on multiplex screens as geographies of an idealized ‘elsewhere’.

In “Of Other Spaces” Foucault describes spaces that exist in relation to other sites – as “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted”. Foucault’s heterotopia are those real spaces which function as sorts of counter sites, offering a counteraction whether in terms of their function or nature, existing in a kind of structural or temporal counterpoint. This concept springs from his premise that space in “our epoch...take(s) for us the form of relations among sites”. It is heterogeneous, multi-dimensional, constitutive of both internal and external space, real as well as fantasmatic. Lived space, in fact, constitutes a set of relations among sites “which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another”. In this grid of spatial interconnection, Foucault’s heterotopias, “simultaneously mythic and real” offer up spaces that in their ‘unlikeness’ or deviation from the normative offer up a divergent experience. From the cemetery to the cinema, the honeymoon hotel to the museum, the brothel to the library, these heterotopic spaces exist in a contradictory relation to all other sites, but linked in a configuration where their dissimilar experiences

of space and time is juxtaposed against others but nevertheless exist as a continuum among the sites that make up the ensemble of our lived space.

In the expansion of the horizon of the local in contemporary urban India, elsewhere, as a space of urban desire, appears as that heterotopic space, summoned by the work of the imagination as well as material social construction. It stands at the intersection of the real and the unreal, in the audience's unconscious identification with projected space as also in the space constructed of matter. It appears in the metropolitan urban spaces of India's New Economy which are trying to "emulate the rejuvenated financial districts of Manhattan, London and Singapore" by laying out a vista of spectacular structures (Athique and Hill 130), as well as on multiplex screens whose spatial vision is outlining a new psycho-geographical imagination. A film critic, Kaveree Bamzai, writing for the national magazine *India Today* observes how Bollywood is turning away from the existing public sphere to "the privatised life of the upper classes...moving into a claustrophobic indoor world in India while enjoying public space overseas" (Bamzai). She cites films like *Queen* (2014), whose protagonist finds liberation in Paris and Amsterdam, *Tamasha/Spectacle* (2015), where the lead pair breaks away from the humdrum ordinariness of their lives and discover themselves and each other in the open country of Corsica, and *Dil Dhadakne Do/Let The Heart Beat* (2015), where the entire film takes place aboard a cruise ship on the Mediterranean. In contemporary Bollywood, Bamzai observes, "the city is temptation, but it is also a transit camp to a better life" ("The Shrinking Screen"). It is in this realm of transitoriness of the "transit camp" in the middle class urban psyche that elsewhere assumes its tangibility and import – the elsewhere which is near as well as far, real as well as fantasmatic.

Elsewhere thus becomes a collective construct envisioned, projected and designed by a collective imagination to effect what Appadurai calls "a transformation of the real", changing into glittering islands of new urban spaces of the city or filling up the screen as "an expansive terrain of possibilities" ("The Right to Participate"). This "transformation of the real" is an experiential exchange of feelings

and meanings between where we are and where we are striving to be. The conundrum of the mirror experience where we “discover (our) absence from the place where (we are) since (we) see (ourselves) over there” (Foucault 4) can be extended to the embodied experience of elsewhere on screen because in seeing ourselves where we are not we reconstitute where we are, which Pallasmaa suggests happens when we engage with any work of art, making us “encounter ourselves and our own being-in-the-world in an intensified manner” (*The Architecture of Image* 22). Tracing out the trajectory from here to there, elsewhere thus opens up a space that enables us to see where we are not, giving visibility to one’s self. It is a heterotopia in the sense that though it is envisioned and projected by a collective imagination, it is still a place or a conglomerate of places with geographical markers. Elsewhere thus straddles both the virtual and the real, its locatedness in reality fuelling its potency as topography of the mind, awakening desires and fantasies, directing our intentions, emotions and thoughts. It is the frame which brings in the world and life and then continues beyond the boundaries into the consciousness of the viewer.

But unlike the mirror’s heterotopia, which while opening up an “unreal, virtual place” behind the surface is a tangible reflector (Foucault 4) elsewhere is an imaginative prism, its geographical locatedness notwithstanding. The imaginative effort brings it close from afar, as it molds itself to the concrete matrices of the structures of the New Economy or unfurls across multiplex screens. It is this activation of the imagination that creates images of elsewhere as an embodied and lived space. Arjun Appadurai’s insistence of the imagination as a vital force in the production of any kind of a scalar or material structure or framework (“The Right to Participate”), as well as Juhaani Pallasmaa’s suggestion that it is the activation of the imagination that makes the artistic image shift “from the physical and material existence into a mental and imaginary reality” (*The Embodied Image* 063) underline the permeable boundary between the mind and the world that makes ‘elsewhere’ possible. It becomes a construct of this intertwined experiential dimension of our material and psychological

worlds, deriving its suggestive power from the tension between the perceived and the imagined.

Fuelled by the collective imagination capable of reaching ‘multiple scales and spaces and forms and possibilities’, elsewhere insinuates itself into ‘structures of feeling’, enticing images and feelings from within the soul, turning our attention to our selves and our place in this continuum of spaces spanning the local to the global.

### **Landscape and Liminality**

As a considerable number of multiplex films increasingly retreat into the private world of the middle classes, away from the teeming urban spaces of India to the freeing expanse of a distant landscape, elsewhere appears as a shared dream of the collective urban imagination, imbued with possibilities. The city seems to have “become a transit camp to a better life” (Bamzai), and in taking off from this ‘transit camp’ of contemporary urban life, the multiplex imagination gives shape to these imagined spaces of collective desire. This chapter attempts to locate the elsewheres of the contemporary urban imagination through a reading of the two films *Shanghai* (2012) and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara/You Only Live Once* (2014), whose narratives, though radically divergent from each other in content, style and treatment, embody this compulsive desire of the ‘away’.

The two films frame and narrativize their landscapes in contrasting ways, and my exploration of the elsewhere of the urban imagination is wrought through the prism of their landscapes. I take the term ‘landscape’, in the urban context, in a more expansive way, not restricted to simply panoramic vistas of open spaces, but also the topography of the city space. The ‘idea’ of landscape that this chapter seeks to consider is essentially an *experience* of a landscape, embedded in a pattern of meaning and sensibility that we bring to it. We frame it within the context of our own lives, endowing it with meaning, investing emotion, associating it with memory and binding it with identity. In this transformation into landscape, its significance or potency is only as strong as the hold it has on our

imagination, in the ways we encounter it, in the ways it forms the crux in our negotiations between the self and society.

In the chronology of before and after within the timespan of our lives, landscapes transform from new to old, thus embodying a certain temporality along with its obvious spatiality. Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts, in their introduction to the book “Liminal Landscapes” questions if landscapes, on account of their being “processual” (in terms of their being shaped and produced by human or natural processes or agents) and “in a constant state of transition and becoming”, are “intrinsically liminal” (1-2).

Liminality as a concept gained momentum with the work of anthropologist Victor Turner who describes it as any situation or object that is ‘betwixt and between’ (*Forest of Symbols*). Turner, whose writings have laid much of the theoretical groundwork of our understanding of liminality, considers the liminal as that doorway or transitional space, a sort of a border. Liminality, in that sense, embodies a certain spatio-temporal process, and a consideration of the intrinsic liminality of landscapes underlines their malleability and expands their cinematic possibilities.

The liminality of cinematic landscapes, rests on the inherent spatial nature of cinema, as Juhaani Pallasmaa suggests, in cinema’s ability to “define the dimensions and essence of existential space”, in its ability to “create experiential scenes” (*The Architecture of Image* 13). Pallasmaa observes how the city as a phenomenon is “experientially infinite” suggesting how “a street in a film does not end at the edge of the screen; it expands all around the viewer as a network of streets, buildings and life situations” (21). It is in the context of this embodied nature of cinematic experience, in its affordance of an intertwining of our material and psychological worlds, that landscape can assume a more dynamic role than as mere backdrop. In fact, Eisenstein’s suggestion of landscape as “the freest element in film, the least burdened with servile, narrative tasks...” (*Nonindifferent Nature* 217) acquires resonance in this regard. In foregrounding landscape from its usual status as ‘setting’, it acquires the density of a text, open to be read and decoded, pliable to an array of interpretive activity.

W.J.T Mitchell's consideration of landscape as a *medium* of representation rather than as mere image or symbol opens it further to a range of possibilities. In fact, Mitchell's conception of landscape as 'dynamic' and 'in motion' lends itself particularly well to the study of cinematic landscape. His emphasis on the elemental aspects of landscape – what he calls as “a physical and multisensory medium...in which cultural meanings and values are encoded” (14) – activating its own sense of mediation, prevents its slippage into the background of the story space and connects it to the tradition of which it is a part of. His insistence on the landscape's ability to only act as a medium of expressing value, but also “for expressing meaning, for communication between persons” (15) underlines the malleability of landscapes, how it can be seen as “a body of symbolic forms capable of being invoked and reshaped to express meanings and values” (14).

Our tendency of reading film space as story space springs from our predilection to adhere to classical narrative's tradition of privileging of story over space. In *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson explain how viewers are persuaded “to read film space as story space” in classical narration (54). In this context, spectatorial activity can diverge into two modes, as Martin Lefebvre proposes, in his essay “Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema”. Lefebvre proposes a distinction between “two modes of spectatorial activity: a narrative mode and a spectacular mode” – the former viewing locations as setting for the story and its events, and the latter viewing them as spectacles or attractions (30). He terms it as an “‘autonomizing’ gaze”, which “makes possible the transition from setting to landscape”, with the viewer switching between the two modes in the course of a film.

A consideration of landscape as different from story space thus opens it up to an exploration of its aspects beyond the narrative world. The concept of the “location” then changes from backdrop to a reflection on landscape as a construct and as an expression in its own right. In this shift, landscape unveils the interacting ideas, conventions and traditions that inform its representation, and the

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essentially palimpsestic nature of such image making. Urban landscapes on the multiplex screen carry the resonance and energy of the accelerated change of the contemporary urban space. Whether unfolding as Indian urban spaces or foreign landscapes, it is in the processual, transitional nature of their unfolding, that they become doorways of “a physical as well as a psychic space of potentiality” (Andrews and Roberts 1) their liminality becoming a generative act in the construction of the elsewheres of urban desire.

In the two films under consideration in this chapter, *Shanghai* presents a fictional town of Bharat Nagar in India primed to be razed and rebuilt as a new Shanghai, while *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* unfolds mostly in the ‘real’ landscape of Spain. *Shanghai*’s spaces are desolate, marginal, marked by a certain stasis, existing in the economic in-between-ness, while *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*’s is transfused with movement, vitality, a sense of adventure, and travel. They unfold in vistas that offer facets of the contemporary urban experience, with their narratives of hope and oblivion, of travel and reconciliation; but they are also quests, journeys and passages of transformation, launching trajectories of movement and connections.

While Shanghai in *Shanghai* is a dream, a chimera, Spain in *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* is a tangible reality. Their landscapes are thus layered locations, holding breadth as well as depth, articulating an experience of place, which, in both films, apart from their contextual meaning within the narrative structure, acquire the ability to transcend the narrative frame in which they were conceived. In their dynamism, they echo with ideas of belonging and isolation, of placelessness and home, of dreams and fantasies, of fixedness and transit, of arrival and leaving, functioning more as a medium that facilitates an interaction between the inner and the outer landscape, between subjective and objective realities. That way, they are both spaces of potentiality, functioning as doorways to the *imagined*, offering in their affective potency the opportunity of transubstantiation.

## The Politics of Place-Making: Locating Shanghai in *Shanghai* (2012)

Set in the fictitious Indian city of Bharat Nagar, *Shanghai* derives its drama from the machinations that result when the state government attempts to go on a massive land-acquisition drive to build a swanky business hub called the International Business Park. The poor residents of that land vehemently oppose this drive. In spite of the fact that it would evict thousands of people from their land, the construction of the proposed International Business Park is touted as a model of growth and progress for the state, as one more step towards the collective political dream of transforming Bharat Nagar into another Shanghai. Matters come to a head when a left-wing activist spearheading their resistance is killed in a hit-and-run accident. The ensuing chain of events reveal that it was actually premeditated murder, exposing the murky underbelly of local politics and laying bare the complicity of the local government, the police and the bureaucracy in the matter.



Fig. 20. Screen shots from *Shanghai* (2012)

Adapted from the novel 'Z' by Vassilis Vassilikos, the plot of *Shanghai* alludes to that time when the Indian government, at the turn of the millennium, went on a drive to set up SEZ's or Special Economic Zones for business and industrial development in various parts of the country. Special areas were identified for the setting up of these economic zones and the government went on mammoth land-acquisition drives for the purpose. But as dams, mines, thermal plants, business hubs, software parks, industrial plants, malls and multistoried apartment blocks continue to be built, it has also engineered,

side by side, the large-scale displacement and splintering of communities. Dispossession of their traditionally held land and unsatisfactory rehabilitation has led to political and social protests, and in some cases even long drawn out armed conflicts. The Special Economic Zones (SEZs), the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project, and the Vedanta-Niyamgiri mining project are only a few of the contentious issues that mark this conflict over land in contemporary India. *Shanghai* references this issue of large-scale land-acquisition by the government for industrial or business purposes and its far-reaching social and political repercussions.

Shifting focus onto *Shanghai's* landscape unearths this aspect of its thematic expressiveness, its implicit articulation of a reciprocal link between land and national progress. As a film expressly about land per se, landscape in *Shanghai* can be seen to constitute a metanarrative about contemporary India. The large-scale reconfiguration of the Indian urban ecology is producing complex but paradoxical social arrangements within the spatial dynamic of the city space, the spatial fissures in the urban landscape reflecting the societal fissures of post-liberalisation India. In these “splintered urbanist sprawls” (Sundaram 64), the rebranded urban spaces reflecting the values and lifestyle of the new middle class marks out a new India, demarcating it from the old (Athique and Hill 129-130). This is where elsewhere resides, or as Anthony King observes, the places where “financial, economic, cultural, discursive, as well as spatial and architectural manifestations of globalisation overlap” (King 135). *Shanghai* deconstructs this desire for the elsewhere as it spotlights the class struggle that complicates this desire.

Adrian Ivakhiv, author of “Ecologies of the Moving Image” proposes an equation that deconstructs something that he says, “happens in every nation-building enterprise”:

Territory + Narrative + Media = Nation. Territory is what's given, the affordances of the landscape and the ways they are shaped and arranged. Narrative is how they're strung together

with historical events and personages, and given a certain momentum to events moving forward and backward across time. And media refers to the ways that print and visual cultures, in particular, have enabled both an imaginary and a technical apparatus for disseminating that imaginary. Together those three have produced nation as a whole system of symbols, affects, and identifications, in the sense of ‘America and the Hollywood Western’, for instance.

In telling the story of Bharat Nagar (Bharat being another name for India), *Shanghai* is basically talking about the fraught spaces of contemporary India as a whole, the narrative explicating how land in 21<sup>st</sup> century India ignites conflict and political power play, driving fissures in the social fabric, dislocating and dividing communities and splintering cityscapes. The embattled streetscape of Bharat Nagar mediates an idea of a nation under siege, caught in the crossfire of rapid change and social upheaval, activating that “spectacular mode” (Lefebvre 30) of spectatorial activity, complicit in the creation of a landscape with its own self-contained meanings. Amidst the manic streets of curfew-bound Bharat Nagar, bonfires burn and masked rioters clash with the police. The camera assumes various vantage positions in framing this landscape – hoisting itself onto the back of a truck careening through packs of frenzied rioters running amok through city streets, or tracking along rows of shuttered shops and random pitched battles between rioters and police; or in the aftermath of night-long rioting, wrapped in the blue haze of daybreak, looking down from the top of a terrace at the desolate debris-strewn lane, and later coming down to frame a scarred city street in wide angle, a dead body strewn across, a lone policeman radioing for help, standing against a grey sky while smoke billows out from the still-burning bonfires of tires. In contrast to the immersive experience of its structured dramatic situations, the camera drifts around this scarred landscape, in an open-ended engagement with this vista of urban dystopia. It is a landscape visceral in its emotive power, capable of breaking down spatial and temporal distances and generating a response to an actual reality beyond the exhibition space.

Dibakar Banerjee shot mostly in the small towns of Latur and Baramati in Maharashtra in western India, drawing from the natural environment of those places to craft the space of his film. Skirted by an expanse of dusty landscape, *Shanghai* creates a prototype of small town India – a network of winding alleys and densely packed houses, narrow streets filled with rambunctious political rallies, nondescript government offices and spacious official bungalows – all embellished by a diverse imagery of colourful shop fronts, brightly coloured signage, promotional arches, and election campaign paraphernalia of banners, festoons and massive cutouts of political figures. The choreography creates an interdependent relationship between the characters and the camera, generating a highly charged and driven environment, with the camera imposing a proximity that underlines the continuity between character perception and environment.

In its evocative charge, this landscape thus starts to convey an unrelenting sense of what lurks beneath, carrying within itself this channel between the past and present, emerging as a conduit of loss and change. The scene where Jogi, the photographer, identifies the dumped body of his murdered boss, takes place in a dark and murky area of land, under the over bridge, lit only by the headlights from the police van. An impermeable darkness envelopes the scene, streaked only by a lone dim street lamp and the flashing lights of the police van. As cars whizz by on the over bridge in the background, and Jogi steps up to identify the body, lit only by the whizzing headlights of passing cars, the darkness throbs with the menace of what it hides, but its invisibility makes visible the wasteland that circumscribes the perimeter of every Indian city, a boundary of no man's land that cars and trains pass by. There is no moral code that binds this landscape, only indifference and cruelty.

### **Framing the Imagined City: From the 50s to the Present**

In locating 'elsewhere' in the urban landscapes of the contemporary cinematic city, the tracing of the evolution of the cinematic city in the narratives of Hindi popular cinema provides context to this

exploration. It highlights how the imagined city is always “born at the intersection of mental, physical, and social space” (Mazumdar xviii), and explicates the particular synergy between urban experience and film. In the post-Independence period with large-scale migration to the cities, film had emerged as the dominant medium of urban mass entertainment in India, in the absence of other affordable entertainment choices. A rapidly growing urban population greatly influenced popular cinema, steering its direction both aesthetically and thematically, to reflect its concerns and aspirations. Together with such factors as the scarcity of public leisure and a shortage of theatres, the emergence of film exhibition as a mass medium with a wide and differentiated audience (from the working class to the lower and upper middle classes) meant that Indian cinema developed an omnibus *masala* style and an urban bias which steadily overtook the rural centric tilt of Indian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s (Athique and Hill 31).

With the 70s the city entered the screen as an autonomous space with its own thematic concerns, leaving behind “the city-country dyad” of the 50s and 60s cinema which had served to “privilege the values of the countryside as well as assert the precedence of national identity and unity over thematics of class conflict and urban disillusion” (Prasad 98). During the 70s and after, the city emerged on screen “as a self-sufficient space for the staging of epic conflicts and allegorical narratives...” (98), also bringing in a new visual perspective of the city in cinema, which Prasad terms as “view from below”, (as opposed to the “view from above” skyscrapers and tall buildings), a subaltern perspective which reinforced “a strong sense of community solidarity” (93). In *Deewar/ The Wall* (1974), for instance, he notes how “the city scape is invested with new affect, the skyscrapers reminding the spectator “of the labour that went into its construction”, whereas the studied evocation of Bombay’s slums in *Nayakan/ The Hero* (1987) expands cinema’s access to the city beneath the metaphorical city of allegorical tales. *Parinda/ The Bird* (1989) and *Satya* (1998) continued in their realistic evocation of the Bombay milieu and the rootedness of the characters in it, without investing them with nostalgia for

the pastoral bliss of the idyllic rural (93).

In fact, for popular Hindi cinema Bombay has always been the city of choice, but Prasad notes that Bombay's position as default metropolis is more to serve as a "generic metropolitan other", rather than as a specific city. He identifies two cinematic Bombays, one belonging to the period of the 50s and the other to the 70s and after – noting their commonalities but also their differences in terms of their visual quality and narrative functionality. He writes: "The first Bombay...is a city of pleasure and danger, of a thrilling anonymity as well as distressing inequality, both joyous and fearsome, a space where class conflict is a dominant thematic concern... (but) with the advent of a new narrative form in the 70s, a new Bombay makes its appearance, more vivid, dense, naked, disorienting...where the thematics of class conflict acquire an epic dimension and are inscribed into larger national-allegorical and civilizational frameworks..." (87-89). The phenomenon of the Hindi popular cinema evoking a metaphorical city rather than a specific one follows a long trajectory of films right from Homi Wadia's *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936) to Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (1998), to Anurag Basu's *Life in a Metro* (2007).

But with globalisation and liberalisation of the Indian economy, the urban experience has expanded beyond the major metropolitan cities and to a newly urbanized population. Mass crowds, urban violence, consumption and spectacle characterise this "urban delirium" (Mazumdar xxii), transforming the urban ecology of major metropolises and altering the skylines of suburban India. The cinematic city registers this shift in urban experience, rendering visible the new spatial and temporal configurations of the urban landscape. A diverse range of narratives express this complex labyrinth of this contemporary urban experience, mediating journeys in a range of perspectives that shape the cartography of this post globalized cinematic city.

## (Dis)locating Elsewhere



Fig. 21. Bird's eye view of Bharat Nagar, screen shot from *Shanghai* (2012)

In *Shanghai* the landscape effects a subtle disjunction within the overall scheme of the narrative that gives it an autonomous element. Dislocation is *Shanghai's* overriding theme, and its landscapes reflect and embody it in various ways. In fact, the dynamics of the opening shot set it apart from the rest of the narrative. Distanced and separated, it sets up the environment as a distinct and autonomous entity, independent of a subjective perspective. The film begins with an extreme bird's eye view of an expanse of cityscape. From this straight down vantage point, the space laid out below is a swathe of irregular blocks of varying shapes and sizes interspersed with a pattern of lines and dots. The soundtrack plays the sounds of a city, but the aural effect of the sounds is one that is in consonance with someone at the ground level. Aerial landscapes, in the absence of the horizon or sky, present a distancing effect, and the opening aerial shot of a cityscape, a lattice of radiating lines and travelling dots floating across the screen, gives off that effect. Held in a static shot for seventeen seconds, with the audio level of the soundtrack running in counterpoint to the magnification of the image, the opening shot thus creates a dissonance that is both deliberate and layered. The static shot prevents from entering more fully into the landscape, the soundtrack instead functioning as a sort of an aural

fractal zoom in allowing the sounds of the city (with the fading in of the half-hearted whistling of the character who appears in the next shot) to wash around the viewer. It is an effect somewhat disorienting, its basic contrivance seeming to further underline the isolation of the bird's eye view.

The distance of the opening shot combined with the fact that it is not anchored in a point of view unlinks it from the narrative, emphasizing its disconnection. While apparently setting out an expansive view of the location, it also dislocates it, resisting its integration into the narrative. Instead it seems to exist as an independent entity, a free-floating conglomeration of image and idea, assuming its own aesthetic and narratological function. While on one hand, it seems to exist as a macrocosm of all the different landscapes existing within its spatial perimeter, all fused into the sweeping bird's eye view, it also presents itself as an abstraction of the image. Mapped out in a pattern of lines, blocks and dots, the image of the distanced cityscape, greatly pared down in scale, acquires a symbolic significance. In the graphical nature of the image, a vista of space sculpted into dense gridded cityscape, it pulsates with symbolic value – the landscape as a human construct, shaped by human processes and agents.

From the extreme bird's eye point of view, the camera abruptly cuts to a close shot of a character lying in the back of a pickup truck, mulling over soldiers going off to war. The disjunction between the two camera angles, an extreme long shot followed by a close shot with a different point of view, interrupts the continuity between the two successive shots. But it drops the viewer into the maelstrom of Bharat Nagar, right into one of its cramped alleyway, where two men are planning a murder. What follows is a succession of images that whirl out in an urgent, expansive energy, tracing the geography of a small Indian town that stretches from its dusty outskirts to its dimly lit streets. While the narrative explicates how land in 21<sup>st</sup> century India ignites conflict and political power play, the landscape pulsates with the urgency and immediacy of its contested spaces. Meanwhile, the elsewhere of Shanghai looms large and fuels this contestation.

Pankaj Mishra, writing about the “defiantly modern” landscape of Shanghai in his book *The Great Clamour* describes “skyscrapers of a postmodern snootiness, gleaming new industrial parks – with landscaped gardens”, “American-style luxury condominiums with names such as ‘Rich Gate’”, and the “wreckage (of demolished low-rise houses) surreally reflected in the glass facades of tall office buildings”(“Shanghaied Into Modernity”). It is this ‘defiantly modern’ landscape – shaped by, as Mishra calls it, the “storm of progress... propelling the angel of history into the future even as a pile of debris grows at his feet” – that circulates in the popular imagination. *Shanghai* recalls this shiny but debri-strewn landscape in Bharat Nagar’s dream of an elsewhere, as Bharat Nagar is set up to be razed to build the gleaming towers of an International Business Park.



Fig. 22. Windsor Heights, *Shanghai* (2012)

Elsewhere thus shimmers beckoningly in Shanghai’s horizon, awaiting our arrival, holding up a mirror to where we are not, but potently enabling in its imaginative intensity to envision us there. In this imaginative intensity, the landscape assumes a processual nature, in a state of transition and becoming, suspended in a state of in-between-ness. When Dr. Ahmedi, the academic-activist spearheading the Bharat Nagar resistance, arrives at the small Bharat Nagar airport, he observes the expanse of barren land flanking both sides of the road, signposted by a giant hoarding bearing the picture of a cluster of

shiny multistoried apartments, proclaiming it as the site of 'Windsor Heights'. The landscape is framed from Dr. Ahmedi's point of view, through the windscreen of the moving vehicle, the hoarding of 'Windsor Heights' standing out against the starkness of the dry dusty land ringed by makeshift fencing. Framed in a moving shot, with the camera panning from the windscreen to the open window of the car, the landscape passes by, its emptiness stretching into the far distance, foregrounded by the 'Windsor Heights' signpost, extending the invitation to 'Come! Live the Luxury!' This sequence of Dr. Ahmedi's passage through the expanse of dusty landscape reclaimed for construction purposes, visually suggests the possible future for Bharat Nagar.

The dry, featureless expanse of the proposed "Windsor Heights", roofed by a flat sky, and signposted by a hoarding which visualizes its future transformation, is a composite of juxtaposed meanings, forming a densely layered image. In this image, the physical reality of the landscape is juxtaposed with a photographic image, framed in a tense co-existence with each other. The tangibility of the dusty land assumes significance against the illusory quality of the photograph, its shiny tall buildings seemingly tenuous against the solid physicality of the landscape. But the image promises a complete transformation that would erase the present landscape, and it is in this promise of its inevitability that the image acquires power. The landscape and the image do not exist in a dynamic of the present and the future, rather they effect a dynamic of the past and the present – the expanse of vast barren land has already receded into the past, as the image takes over the present, exhorting to 'Call 2484501 NOW!!' to 'COME! LIVE THE LUXUREY!' (*sic*). It is in the 'NOW' that the image exists, while the landscape, its physical tangibility notwithstanding, has retreated and regressed into the past, presenting an interesting contrast between the real as unreal and the unreal as real.

In this dichotomous arrangement of the old and the new, the tension between the two landscapes, is in the contrasting *ideas* of them. The image landscape of 'Windsor Heights' comes pre-coded with the 'Globalisation Dream', activating an imagination that locks in with the idea of a 'modern' landscape of

tall towers and landscaped gardens. On the one hand, it is a descriptive image, interacting with a character viewpoint as well as existing in a layered juxtaposition with the physical landscape behind. But as it stakes its claim on this vast expanse of land, it also remains autonomous with its own narratological function, as well as being rich in symbolic content. The director of the film, Dibakar Banerjee says that his “film is about the Shanghai of our dreams” (Bhatia) and the ‘Windsor Heights’ sequence encapsulates that dream in a microcosm. The *idea* of ‘Windsor Heights’ is a dream of transformation, of invention, and festooned across the *tabula rasa* of the emptied landscape it invents that dream.

### **The Idea of Shanghai**

Landscape in *Shanghai* (2012) thus exists in a dichotomy of the real and the imagined, the reality of its spaces in contrast to the imagined Shanghai. The spaces that tumble out in *Shanghai* trace the geography of the small town of Bharat Nagar that stretches from its dusty outskirts to its dimly lit streets, shifting across the lines that separate the privileged from the poor. But landscape in *Shanghai* is also an imagined elsewhere, a construct, an idea to be imagined. The distant landscape of Shanghai becomes an extension of that imagination, and the *idea* of Shanghai as a landscape of chrome and glass, of sky-high towers, industrial parks and shiny condominiums acquires the shape of potent dreams. It is this imagined experience of Shanghai that is sought by the political class in the Bharat Nagar landscape. Within the cinematic geography of the film, Shanghai is thus a construct, an “elsewhere”, a perfect other place, a place where we are not. Simultaneously mythic and real, Shanghai and Bharat Nagar exist in that intersection of an infinite open space imbued with possibilities.

On the occasion of the release of the film, Dibakar Banerjee, the director of the film, said in an interview: “The title of the film is a comment on what we are as a nation. We don’t like living in our

own country. In our minds, we want to migrate to a foreign land. The film is about the Shanghai of our dreams and how we are fighting to achieve that” (Bhatia). As a ‘multiplex film’ made by an avowedly multiplex filmmaker<sup>1</sup>, *Shanghai’s* attempts to capture this aspect of the contemporary urban experience assumes some ironical significance, in light of the fact that the proliferation of multiplex theatres with their distinctive architecture has become an intrinsic part of this spatial re-engineering of the urban landscape, with massive investments and tax incentives given to encourage their development as a key leisure infrastructure of the New Economy. Athique and Hill observe how “multiplex theatres are powerfully implicated in the spatial politics of Indian cities “ by noting that “the creation of valuable new public space within Indian cities, which the multiplex undeniably represents, is...at the expense of farmers, industrial workers and the urban poor” via the “re-zoning at urban fringes, renovation of former industrial areas and the demolition of slums and illegal settlements” (2).

But ironical implication aside, *Shanghai* does offer a scathing critique of this fantasy of elsewhere and the human cost it entails, linking the fantasy of the away to its story of dislocation. Making space for elsewhere involves large-scale displacement and estrangement from the familiar, and into the unfamiliarity of the likeness of a distant phantasmagoria. In explicating the ways in which the politics of ‘place-making’ (a term geographer Yi-Fu Tuan used in *Topophilia* to describe the ways we form close connections with landscapes) unfold, *Shanghai* lays bare the structure of a class based hierarchical society and the unequal ways in which power is distributed. In the displacement of communities is the erasure of memories, meanings, and identities tied to the particular place. As a new

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview, Dibakar Banerjee said: “The kind of cinema I make and the kind of cinema many other urban elite directors...make, yes the urban middle classes are the main audience because today, the audience is defined by the city, the place where the film is released and where the director comes from. And there’s a collusion between— not an overt collusion— the studio producers and the media that prints about those films. So the directors, the makers, the actors who populate those films with the audiences, there’s a collusion; a class collusion...*Shanghai* will not be seen by the truck drivers, I mean I’ve accepted that, I’m a part of that” (“Love, Life and the Movies”, Sayan Bhattacharya, *KindleMag*, 7 April 2013).

sense of place is given shape, the land is wiped clean of the vestiges of the past to set the stage for a present as a play of imagined futures – as foreshadowed in the animated promotional videos of the international business hub of gleaming towers, blue skies and landscaped gardens, and in the giant hoardings of multistoried luxury apartments and swimming pools of ‘Windsor Heights’.

In this encounter with elsewhere, landscape in *Shanghai* thus opens up a “terrain of possibilities”, offering glimpses into new ways of experiencing everyday life. It transforms from inert background or setting into something with a processual dynamic, conveying a sense of transition, of becoming, its spaces holding the potentiality of transubstantiation. Elsewhere, whether as dream or nightmare (considering which side of the class divide one is on), animates this landscape, accentuating it and binding it to the imagination. It engages in a complex way, as a pervasive presence, unfolding as an associative and emotionally responsive space, a geography of the mind into which we root our imagination. Peter Wollen observes how the cultural change in our times propelled by globalisation seems to involve “a move away from a tactile to an optical apprehension of the world, to a fascination with seeing at a distance, with access to an elsewhere, rather than learning to inhabit a space...” (214). In *Shanghai* it is this “fascination”, this potent pull of the distant elsewhere that activates the narrative arc and gives shape to the lives of its characters. As the activist Dr. Ahmedi protests the razing of Bharat Nagar and the displacement of its community, and the government and bureaucracy remain undeterred and fixated on the vision of a Shanghai-like international business hub, the film throbs with the conflicting values of opposing forces, a force-field of contrasting trajectories of actions and intentions, tethered to this invisible pull of the elsewhere.

Landscape in *Shanghai* thus transforms from being a significant setting to a sentient, potent element held together by its own meaning, its expressiveness amplified by its engaging of the audience’s imagination in the totality of its meaning-making. Even while throbbing in tandem with the immediacy of the narrative trajectory, it asserts its own act of mediation, translating Bharat Nagar as an Indian

'everycity' and its fantasy of elsewhere as the urban middle class dream.

### **The Elsewhere of Here: *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* / *You Only Live Once* (2011)**

In Zoya Akhtar's *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara/ You Only Live Once* (2011), henceforth referred to as *ZNMD*, three friends set out on a road trip through Spain. Kabir, Imran and Arjun get together at Kabir's initiative for one last "bachelor trip" (on the eve of Kabir's impending wedding) that involves each of them choosing an adventure activity for the whole group. As they go deep sea diving, sky diving and participate in the annual 'encierro' or bull run in Pamplona during the San Fermin festival, their Spanish road trip becomes the frame through which they confront their fears and phobias, resolve their past issues and find closure, forge new relationships and reaffirm their faith in themselves and in their collective friendship.



Fig. 23. Spanish landscape, screen shot from *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011)

Unlike Shanghai in *Shanghai*, which is more of an imaginative construct, an elsewhere, a place where we are not but striving to arrive at, Spain in *ZNMD* is not a tantalising distant elsewhere, but an easily accessible place. It is not an imagined future, but exists in the here and now of the story world of the film. It is a place the three leading characters easily travel to, flying in from different parts of the world to first meet up in Barcelona. In this casual accessibility of Spain, the distant is brought near and made

familiar, linking it to the itinerary and the cultural imagination of the globalised Indian. In fact, the difference that underlines *ZNMD*'s experience of landscape from that of *Shanghai*'s lies in the fact that whereas in *Shanghai* the struggle is in shaping the existing landscape into the image of a foreign 'elsewhere', glimpsed only in animated promotional videos of the future and in giant hoardings of multistoried towers and their swimming pools, in *ZNMD* that 'elsewhere' is already here, enveloped in the present, into which its characters seamlessly step with casual nonchalance.

In contrast to the chimera of Shanghai that was preeminent in *Shanghai*'s experience of landscape, *ZNMD*'s 'elsewhere' – comprising a mosaic of locations across the length and breadth of the Spanish landscape – is tangible; its characters travel across the length and breadth of Spain, their itinerary marked out in their maps as they drive out from Barcelona to Costa Brava to Seville and then to Pamplona via Bunol. The flow of locations unfolds in a sensuous rhythm, supporting the ambience of journey, discovery, adventure and freedom. From the art nouveau architecture and Gaudi buildings of Barcelona to the Costa Brava coastline and then on to the Andalusian region and the Basin of Pamplona – the beauty of the Spanish cities, towns, mountains and coastline fill up the frame to create the singular experience of the film's landscape.

### **Switzerlands of India: Foreign Landscapes in Hindi Popular Cinema**

In the pre-liberalisation era foreign landscapes used to unfold on the screenscape of Hindi cinema mostly as locations of fantasy, dreamscapes for choreographed song sequences, the *foreign-ness* of the landscape showcasing and heightening the sudden break in the narrative. Switzerland was one of the most favoured locations, with romantic song sequences set against the snowcapped Alps and the rolling green of the Swiss landscape. Christine Rogers, an American photographer, in her photographic exhibition titled "The Switzerland of India", observes how "the mythos of the Swiss Alps – exists as an integral aspect of the cultural imagination" (Eler). Rogers, while on a Fulbright scholarship to India,

stumbled upon how ‘Switzerland’ exists as a mythologized landscape in the Indian cultural imagination, with various hill stations in the northern Indian landscape promoting themselves as ‘Switzerlands of India’. Researching the long history of Bollywood films being made in Switzerland, Rogers found out that Switzerland became a surrogate for the Himalayas to shoot fantasy song sequences, when security issues made it difficult to shoot in places like Kashmir in the northern Indian landscape (Eler). But when this northern Indian mountainous region became more stabilized, it started being heavily marketed as the Switzerland of India. In her search for the various ‘Switzerlands of India’, Rogers and her assistant travelled throughout northern India for a year, locating these romanticized landscapes and noting that “though there is no single Switzerland of India, yet depending on whom we speak with and where, they will tell you otherwise” (Eler).

The focus of Rogers’ work, though slightly tangential to the scope of this chapter, does bring into focus this aspect of how a particular landscape becomes the frame of a specific fantasy space, becoming the cultural reference point of an entire generation. It also illuminates how malleable landscapes are, becoming the screen onto which ideas are projected, pliable to be shaped by a collective imagination to produce a specific ‘structure of feeling’. Rachel Dwyer observes that

[t]he early Hindi films showed Kashmir as the ideal location for romance, and it was only in the 1970s that this site came to be displaced by Europe – above all Switzerland...[t]hese places also constitute some sort of privacy for the romantic couple, a private space in the public domain, where they can escape from the surveillance of the family which prevents, encourages and controls romance, love and marriage. (197-198)

Thus in many of the Hindi films of the period, the Swiss landscape on screen, serving as frequent setting for the romantic interludes of the leading pair, became the archetype of the romantic landscape in the cultural imagination of the Indian viewer. Yash Chopra, in particular, veteran Bollywood

director and deliverer of blockbuster hits right from the 60s to the 90s, and anointed the “king of romance” by the mainstream press, had a penchant for shooting romantic song sequences in Switzerland, prompting the Swiss government to name a lake after him and appoint him as brand ambassador for Switzerland Tourism in India. When Air India started offering special packages for honeymooning couples to Switzerland in the 60s and 70s, it was a sign of how “the mythos of the Swiss Alps” (Eler) had become intertwined with the romantic desire of millions of Indians.

Framed as dreamscape, this particular landscape became identified with romantic desire and intertwined with the longings of millions of Indians. On screen, the mountainous Swiss landscape came to represent a fantastical element and its unfolding within the diegesis opened up a space where the story and characters could inhabit that fantastical, hallucinatory realm in varying degrees. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok define fantasy as “all those representations, beliefs, or bodily states that gravitate toward...the preservation of the [topographical] status quo” (“Mourning or Melancholia” 125). In the romantic song sequences set in ‘Switzerland’, the landscape represented an extension of the erotic topography of the mind, in resistance to the ‘normal’ topographical setting of the narrative. In this “fantasy of incorporation”, Switzerland became the natural extension of the psychological “topographical status quo”, the landscape assuming even more formal significance in the romantic musical interludes where it inhabited an extra-diegetic space. In this dynamic, landscape assumed a conceptual significance in its own right, a dreamscape of freedom, devoid of restraint or inhibition.

But as *ZNMD* illustrates, from serving as fantasy settings for song sequences, the “terrain of possibilities” (Appadurai) of foreign landscapes within the screenscape of Hindi cinema has expanded. With the opening up of the economy in the late 90’s, a large number of films started being shot abroad, in locations as diverse as the United States, Turkey, Poland, South Africa and New Zealand. But though a blanket generalization would fail to capture the diverse representational modes of the huge number of films that have been shot abroad, it would be fair to say that in a large number of films the

foreign landscape serves to accentuate the narrative, in varying degrees of effectiveness, rather than just function as fantastical dream settings. A case in point would be films like *Dil Chahta Hai /The Heart Desires* (2001), *Salaam Namaste* (2005), both of which had substantial portions of it shot in Australia, *Hum Tum /You And Me* (2004), which had a portion of it shot in Paris, *Chalte Chalte /As We Walk By* (2003), shot in in the Greek island of Mikonos and others. In fact, the nineties witnessed a slew of films set and shot abroad, going by the faintly pejorative term ‘NRI (Non Resident Indian) films’ in the popular media. These films were for the large part set abroad, with characters that lived and worked abroad and were integrated into the social dynamic of the places that they inhabited. The narratives mostly explored the dilemmas and contradictory impulses that marked their lives, caught between the two worlds of home and away.

### **The Ease of Elsewhere**

In *ZNMD*, however, these conflicting impulses are smoothly resolved, the three characters casually stepping into the Mediterranean landscape with a nonchalance and ease without a trace of any self-consciousness or awkwardness. Spain is no dream, just an extension of the privileged space that Arjun, Kabir and Imran inhabit in India itself, as they fly business class (with the exception of Imran) from different parts to land in Barcelona. As they ensconce themselves in plush hotels and rent an SUV and then a convertible to drive through the Spanish landscape, what is striking is the familiarity and ease with which they embrace the new landscape. It is in embodying this familiarized ‘elsewhere’ that *ZNMD*’s Spanish landscape reverberates with its own meaning, even while it intersects and interweaves with the trajectory of the narrative arc. As the three young men set off on their road trip from Barcelona, their journey through the Spanish landscape culminates in an altered relationship with their selves and with each other.



Fig. 24. Screen shots from *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011)

In other words, *ZNMD* operates within the familiar framework of the road movie's narrative structure, which entails the transposition of the protagonists from the secure bounds of a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one. But within the road movie's framework of the journey as rite of passage, *ZNMD* eschews the transformative experience arising from an intense interaction, physical or spiritual, with the outer world. Instead the 'terrain of possibilities' that *ZNMD* lays out for its three protagonists in the elsewhere of Spain is one that is intensely self-involved. Whether skydiving or deep sea diving or taking part in the Pamplona Bull Run, activities expressly chosen to resolve their individual fears and phobias, their engagement has the smooth, reasoned quality of a designed experience. Their method of encounter with the landscape is devoid of any complex or layered attachments, and in passing through towns, lakes, coastlines and festivals, the landscape is reduced to a series of consumable sites. It is a touristic gaze, interspersed with designer daydreams, that marks their journey through the Spanish landscape. This is an elsewhere of air-conditioned comfort, its jagged edges smoothed off, packaged for the consumption of an audience ensconced in the plush and comfortably cooled auditoriums of

multiplex theatres.

But perhaps the real import of *ZNMD*'s landscape lies in this delivery of packaged consumption, in the ease, comfort and smoothness of its transference on screen, in its facilitation of an easy accessibility to an elsewhere. The characters are a bridge to this elsewhere, modeling the casual negotiation and engagement with a foreign place while remaining cocooned within the borders of their own cultural identities. *ZNMD* is not about the immersion and transmogrification of its characters through a primal landscape, but rather about the ease of stepping into a controlled elsewhere, and inhabiting it casually. It embodies an expansive view of the world, of global connections and intersections, catering to an audience "fascinated with seeing at a distance, [and] with access to [this] elsewhere" (Wollen 214). Spain is far as well as near, existing in a dynamic of proximity and distance, illuminating where we are not, but showing us where we can be. *ZNMD* locates itself in this intersection, facilitating an encounter with place that in Pallasmaa's words, illuminates our "own being-in-the-world in an intensified manner" (*The Embodied Image* 063).

The Spanish landscape in *ZNMD* is not fantasy setting or an interchangeable ephemeral dreamscape existing as an extra diegetic interlude. Rather, it constitutes the entire diegetic space of the film; its geographical locatedness roots it as tangible physical space, fostering an audience engagement that links it to their own physical world, a post globalized world of hypervisuality, 'simultaneity', and 'juxtaposition'. *ZNMD*'s Spain slots into this grid of spatial interconnectedness, becoming the mental frame that activates our imagination and directs our associations, emotions and reactions. Juhaani Pallasmaa observes how "the crucial faculty of the image is its magical capacity to mediate between physical and mental, perceptual and imaginary, factual and affectual" (*The Embodied Image* 040). In its visual and auditory pull, the image of the Spanish landscape unfolding on multiplex screens, is embroiled in a similar encounter with its audience, facilitating its experiencing as part of our existential world.

*ZNMD* can be read as sort of having a ritual function for its audience, taking them on a drive through Spain. The journey through the landscape becomes a sort of rite of passage for its audience, granting them associative free play in their imaginative traversal of the landscape. It becomes a transitional space, an imaginative doorway to an expansive ‘terrain of possibilities’ – its ‘newness’ on multiplex screens articulating a sort of a tabula rasa on which to project a new self. Within the road movie’s framework of journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar and back to the known, it is in the encounter with the unfamiliar space, whether ludic or fraught, that constitutes the *raison d’être* of the genre.

*ZNMD*’s manufacturing of this encounter with the Spanish landscape, structured by an ordered progression along the motorway interrupted by interludes of designed diversions (from a flamenco dance-off to a tomato festival and various adventure sports in between) is insistent on a fascination with playing away. It is an encounter designed to place the multiplex spectator as imaginers, inviting an ‘unconscious exchange’ between the audience and the space of the place on screen. Pallasmaa observes how in the experiencing of space, “is a dialogue, a kind of exchange – I place myself in the space and the space settles in me” (*The Architecture of Image* 22). *ZNMD*’s Spanish landscape effects this intersection with the multiplex imagination, offering up this vista of an expansive elsewhere in which to re-invent or make a new beginning.

*ZNMD* and *Shanghai* unfold their respective elsewheres in different contexts, the shaping of their ‘away’ contingent on the differing exigencies of their narrative realities. While *Shanghai*’s elsewhere waits at the periphery, as a dream, its unfolding complicated by a class struggle over land, *ZNMD*’s elsewhere is already here, neatly packaged and easily accessible. Though articulating contrasting dynamics of proximity and distance, they both enact a collage of connecting and intersecting spaces, forging an assemblage of imagined experiences, perceptions, thoughts and feelings that give rise to a new imaginative reality. Thus both elsewheres exert a strong pull on the imagination, effecting a relationship that is deeply relational and dialectical. And so even though unfolding in contrasting

contexts – one fraught with the anxiety of the globalizing world and the other gliding into the matrix of the smooth transnational spaces inhabited by the multiplexed imagination – they both exist as spaces of potentiality, offering transubstantiation, a new beginning, impacting our sense of self and our view of the world.

# 7

## **Screens on Screen**

### **Incorporating the Digital in the Cinematic**

The traversal of the city space by the urban Indian to the inviolate darkness of the multiplex auditorium is a different felt experience than twenty years ago. A reconfigured urban landscape is visible in the rapidly changing skylines, expanding urban peripheries, reclaimed spaces for shopping malls, multiplexes and gated communities, and new arterial roads that slice into or entirely circumvent the old structure of the city. It is not only changing the look and character of Indian cities, but is also reorganising the urban landscape in new social and spatial formations, producing complex but paradoxical social arrangements within the spatial dynamic of the city. Meanwhile, this reconfigured urban space is also in part a jumbled network of dislocated but pervasive screens that stretch out in all directions – on billboards, living rooms, car dashboards, photo frames, ATM machines, game consoles, mobile devices, and shop windows, among other things. These screens, luminous islands of space and time, are at once connected and disconnected, intersecting this traversal of urban space at various points in a pattern of intervention both predictable and unexpected by turns, inserting themselves in the flow of urban life in a dynamic collusion of moving images and sounds. It is a

*screenscape* that in linking and splintering disparate spaces and time, centering and re-centering our bodies across time and space, co-opt the spectator within a space-time continuum that is multilayered and transformational.

The screenscape thus becomes an affectively charged repository of the various selves of the middle-class urban Indian, real and imagined, strung across the sprawl of urban space. It becomes a composite geography of images mobilized through time and movement, displayed through a multiplicity of viewing positions – a giant force field of screens that is physically traversed every day, and is engaged with at an array of narrative junctures, negotiating multiple frames, effecting the joining or disjunction of divergent visions. In describing this invasion of screens in our everyday lives as a “consumption of spectacle”, Francesco Casetti observes how, by the end of the twentieth century, “the city itself...was increasingly turning into an exhibition space: big billboards gave up their places to gigantic moving images; road signage often adopted an animated form; transit stations, waiting rooms and streets were filled with screens; and walls became media facades, a transformation of the future that *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, USA, 1982) depicted” (“Cinema Lost and Found”).

### **The Multiplex and the Digital**

This chapter attempts to explore the nature of the intrusion of these new digital screens into multiplex film narratives and their influence of these new forms of media in crafting a new cinematic experience. In twenty-first century India, a profusion of screens mark the urban landscape, cloaking it in a hypervisuality that incites a new imaginative capacity in the spectatorial journey. From home to multiplex auditoriums, the spectator’s journey is structured by an analogous network of additional screen spaces that runs in parallel to the changed contours of the agglomeration of physical spaces of the urban landscape. The screen is not just fixed in the auditorium, but tracks along as a continuous presence in the spectatorial journey. This initiates a paradigm shift in the phenomenology of film

experience, as a string of screens now stakes out the field of our vision, from the insides of our homes to the sprawl of the cityscape outside, from our pockets to our walls.

The multiplex film, since its inception has been marked by its insistence on articulating the new, in expressing the transformative moment in time that has been brought about by a post-liberalisation economy and the ensuing connection to a wider global arena and its attendant influences. Whether it's the accelerated impact of technology, the popularity of satellite television aesthetics and genres, the growing usage of English in informal conversations or even the inclusion of new non-metropolitan urban audiences, the multiplex screen has been acutely attuned to the shifts and turns of the social and cultural landscape, and been energized by each of these aspects. Technology especially has been a consciously integrated and offered as a representation of the new keeping in mind its dominant new middle class demographic and their desires and aspirations. As Sangita Gopal observes:

One of the most salient characteristics of the multiplex film is its constant featuring of other communication technologies – radio, television, telephony, and new media. This depiction frequently acts as shorthand for detailing the contemporary in various ways – it might thematize media, activate plot movements, or affirm cinema's capacity to encompass other media. More than any other type of cinema, the multiplex film has most keenly registered the momentous communications revolution in India. (135)

Indeed, the multiplex, both in its filmic narratives as well as in its adoption of the latest technology in the staging of its films reflects the rapidly evolving communications landscape in India. Sangita Gopal observes how the first generation of multiplex films, characterised by “genre-mixing and code-switching”, was heavily influenced by television genres and aesthetics (135). She notes how works of directors like Mani Ratnam, Mahesh Bhatt, Ram Gopal Varma and others “revealed a fresh, technologically slick approach to the contemporary” (135). To illustrate her point, Gopal observes how

the introduction of the Steadicam in the films of the post-liberalisation era, signaling “the rapid technologizing of Bollywood cinema and its industrial reorganisation”, “enable[d] a detailed probing of objects that expresse[d] the phenomenology of middle-class life”, its “disembodied mobility captur[ing] the modern in its velocity and angularity” (20). Gopal suggests that the Steadicam came to function as an analytical node “connect[ing] technology, sociology and aesthetics in New Bollywood” (21). Presently, new camera technologies like 3D cameras, 4K and 8K resolution shooting, computer generated imaging (CGI) to cloud computing services which are facilitating collaborative filmmaking by offering services like real-time editing and storage of large media files are further technologizing New Bollywood. In the sphere of exhibition, continuous innovation has become the buzzword for multiplex chains to retain their edge in the competitive market. From the adoption of the latest immersive Dolby Atmos immersive audio and laser projection, to the acquisition of hi-tech motion 4DX seats fitted with sensors to synchronise with the action on screen to heighten audience emotion (KPMG-FICCI 2016), multiplexes are competing with each other to stay ahead in technology. In addition, the ubiquity of smartphones, tablets and wireless Internet access amongst its target audience demographic is also leading multiplexes to expand their online ticketing and food and beverage ordering platforms (KPMG-FICCI 2016). For example, INOX’s *Paperless Entry* and *Q Buster* allows patrons to use their mobile apps to book tickets online and also order their food and drinks directly from their seats. INOX also has what is called Bluetooth-enabled “information beacons” which relay information regarding offers and tickets to their customers’ smartphones (KPMG-FICCI 2016).

In entering the multiplex, the urban spectator thus steps into a hi-tech environment, where new digital technology has completely transformed the cinema experience. Besides digital screens and laser projection and sound equipment, the other ancillary services offered by the multiplex which connect spectators’ smartphones and tablets via mobile apps and cloud technology means that the multiplex and its audience are implicated in the web of the larger screenscape. The multiplex audience is a

digitally savvy audience with access to the latest technology. While the metropolitan areas were the early adopters of the mobile broadband revolution and continue to be dominant, consumers in smaller towns and cities (the new audiences of the expanding multiplex) are rapidly bridging the gap. India emerged as the third largest smartphone market globally in 2014, with smartphone penetration growing rapidly due to the falling prices of high-end devices and the adoption of 3G services (PTI, “India Overtakes China”). Studies conducted by the Ericsson Consumer Lab show that, on an average, Indian users spend three hours a day on their smartphones, and one-third of that time is spent in engaging with chat, social media and gaming apps (Dey). Online navigation, e-commerce and cloud storage services are being increasingly adopted by smartphone users, with 36 percent of urban mobile Internet users accessing financial services weekly on their smartphones (Ericsson Consumer Lab 2015). The growth of video and music consumption on mobile devices is another emerging trend, with 70 percent of urban mobile Internet users streaming videos and 40 percent streaming music on their smartphones. In fact, it is predicted that monthly mobile data consumption in India will see a 18-fold increase by 2020 (Ericsson Consumer Lab 2015).

Thus as the urban Indian hooks him/herself into a networked society, it is a pervasive screenscape through which s/he negotiates her way, interacting with different media experiences in different environments and different devices. Besides the plethora of personal mobile devices like smartphones, tablets and reading devices, other screens also dominate his/her line of vision – from the screens of televisions, computers, laptops and video game consoles, to those screens of showroom windows, electronic billboards, ATM machines and GPS systems on car dashboards. While the filmic vision of the cinema screen imports and accommodates the digital spaces/screens as intrinsic parts of its storyworlds, the multiplex spectator carries the digital spaces/screens in her person, via her personal digital devices, conflating a supra-digital space within the space and time of the filmic narrative. Even the extra-filmic narrative that constitutes public service announcements and advertisements at the

beginning of the film carries the digital presence with commercials for the latest digital products and devices. In illustrating how advertisers consider the multiplex crowd “as an entirely different proposition from the regular cinema crowd”, Athique and Hill quote the proprietor of a multiplex, Parveen Kumar of Wave Cinemas in Noida, who states:

If you are advertising for Nokia N Series, you have to play this thing in multiplexes, because these people can afford Nokia N Series. Or let it be Windows Vista, in normal halls it doesn't matter any difference if we are advertising Windows Vista or Nokia because both things are out of their reach. So multiplex clientele matters, because Pepsi, Nokia, LG, Samsung...we are investing more on their promotions...(because) we are their biggest consumers in that way.  
(Parveen Kumar, 09/03/2007) (163)

In fact, global technology companies like Google, Facebook and Apple are eyeing India as the next big market for their services and products as the government's drive towards strengthening the digital infrastructure has set the stage for an exponential growth in this sector. While Facebook controversially lost out in delivering free Internet to Indian mobile subscribers under their 'Free Basics' programme in early 2016, on account of net neutrality concerns of the Indian government, Google has already rolled out an ambitious programme for delivering free Wi-Fi to Indian railway stations across urban India. All these developments portend significant shifts across the vista of Indian cyberspace. It means that more and more screens are being added to what Casetti calls 'this complex circuit of circulating images', expanding the Indian screenscape and integrating it as a continuous presence in consumers' lives.

The digital thus insistently interlaces the cinematic, and the occurrence of digital screens on cinematic narratives can be explored as part of this ubiquity of the digital, as an “analytical node” (Gopal 21) that by its intrusion into the very materiality of film, influences its aesthetics on one hand, and on the other

also establishes a psychological territory that shapes and affects the sensory experience of film. As a new collaborator of both screen and spectator, the digital becomes complicit in this dynamic and transitive correlation between the “two embodied acts of vision” (Sobchak 24) at play during the screening of a film, and becomes part of the “transcendent space” of the multiplex auditorium. It prompts a phenomenological shift, changing the way we watch film, concomitant with the larger changes in the very materiality of film itself. As Francesco Casetti says: “the movie screen no longer stands by itself...because of outside influences, its very nature is changing. We can no longer observe it as we did before, nor can we expect it to offer us the same kind of images as it used to” (*The Lumiere Galaxy* 156).

### **The Urban Screenscape: Altering the Cinematic Horizon**

Francesco Casetti observes that a profusion of screens has heralded “a general transformation in their nature” (*The Lumiere Galaxy* 156). He says that the old metaphors of the screen as ‘windows’ or ‘frames’ no longer work, because media itself has changed from being “a means of mediation between us and the world and between us and others” to becoming “nexuses of interconnected circuits” facilitating “a circulation of information” (170). More apt metaphors of today’s screens would be monitor, bulletin board, scrapbook or the wall as the “new screen is linked to a permanent flow of data...not necessarily coupled with an attentive gaze...and does not necessarily lead to a stable reference, an ensured addressee, and a full identification” (168).

The matrix of the present screen world that Casetti lays out – “a diffusion of content on many platforms (spreadability), an interconnection of reception points (networking), and a reactivation of experiences in many situations (relocation)” – has also led to a material mutation of the screen, which is not just a technological transformation but also a conceptual one (162). A veritable “screen explosion” of “surfaces made of liquid crystals, of plasma, and of LED’s, as flexible as a piece of

paper, interconnected, reacting to...touch and...voice..." (162) now facilitates a variety of media experiences in different devices and different environments. This assemblage of flickering screens moulds itself as a sinuous presence alongside the flow of contemporary urban life, making screens not just a visual and aural phenomenon, but a haptic, almost sensuous one. We carry the screen, move it around, wear it on our bodies, and it becomes an extension of ourselves, embedded within our lives, becoming an integral part of the way we experience the world around us. Designer Tom Uglow, creative director of the Google Creative Lab, even talks of "an internet without screens" saying that he thinks "there are better solutions than a world mediated by screens". He paints a scenario of a screen-less world where "touch and speech and gesture...can turn dumb objects like cups and imbue them with the magic of Internet" (Uglow).

All this portends inevitable changes in the cinematic experience, as the cinema screen transforms from being uniquely placed only in a cinema hall into one materialized location among the many other screens that intersect our lives. The cinematic event, in addition to being inseparable from the architecture of its theatrical space, place and time, is also a construct of an intertwined experiential dimension of our material and psychological world, what Foucault described as the essential heterotopic condition of being "the smallest parcel of the world" and also "the totality of the world" (6). In today's new screen-driven world, the plethora of additional screen spaces further complicates this phenomenological nature of the cinema experience, as a whole world of *other* screens now gains entry into the cinematic screen space, changing the cinematic environment, and the nature of its aesthetic illusion. The cinema screen now becomes a node in this screenscape of our urban existence, connected to the "lightning rods" (*The Lumiere Galaxy* 156) of other screens. In adjusting to this new scenario, Casetti observes that cinema is "questioning its own identity (and) discovering perhaps a new destiny..." (156).

Miriam Hansen calls this "a palpable, seismic shift" in the way the cinematic apparatus today

articulates and organizes individual and social experience (22-23). She observes that it is not just that the production of moving images has changed, but that this change “relates to the transformation of just about everything surrounding the cinema – the amazing reorganization of everyday experience in terms of spatiotemporal coordinates, modes of sensory perception and attention, cognition, affect and memory, sociability and the circulation of knowledge” (22-23). She surmises that it is digital technology and its proliferation that is at the root of this ‘seismic shift’:

[From] the Internet and the worldwide web, to phenomena such as *YouTube* and videogames, social networks, GPS, cell phones and instant messaging, and the seemingly inexorable tendency to combine all these media into single mobile pieces of hardware. Given that these developments are driven by a still booming market in consumer electronics and an explosion of electronic marketing and consumption, we are dealing with an unprecedented degree of acceleration in their adaptation...These developments have been described in terms of “a culture of convergence” (Henry Jenkins), in which cinema disappears “into the larger stream of audiovisual media, be they photographic, electronic, or cybernetic. (22-23)

Hansen notes that as content and communication gain priority over the materiality of the medium, the profusion of and collusion of various audiovisual media have initiated a situation where cinema itself disappears into other media. Apart from the obvious medium-specific changes in cinema as production shifts from photo chemicals to digital coding coupled with digital technologies of delivery and circulation, she is more concerned about what these changes mean for the film experience, or what she terms as the “cinema’s relation to publicness” (22). As the original filmic screen within the cinema hall is caught in the profusion and mutations of various forms of audiovisual media, all inexorably driving towards convergence, the cinematic implications of these changes foment deep alterations in the matrix through which the cinematic experience is articulated and organised. Hansen terms these changes as “new configurations of intimacy and publicness”, born out through the prism of a new

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sensory-perceptual arrangement, recalibrating and altering the cinematic horizon in a fundamental way (23).

### **The ‘Other’ Screens of 3G – A Killer Connection, Table No. 21, and Love, Sex Aur Dhokha**

The three films explored in this chapter – *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha/ Love, Sex and Betrayal*, *3G – A Killer Connection*, and *Table No. 21* – were released in 2010, 2012 and 2013 respectively. All three films are deeply reflective of the zeitgeist of these times, mirroring the flux of a changing society as it seeks to align itself to a globalised world. Their narratives are rife with the anxieties, tensions and challenges of stepping into a ‘connected’ world, and their storyworlds articulate this notion of the *screen* as literal as well as metaphorical portal into the larger unknown.

All three films, in co-opting and skillfully threading the various avatars of the new media screen into their narratives, offer themselves as good test cases of how the proliferation and intrusion of various forms of new media are changing the dynamics of the original filmic screen, *de-isolating* it from the darkness of the auditorium and placing it within the connected *screenscape* of contemporary life, thereby impacting and transmuting the filmic experience. In terms of box office success, *LSD* was a moderate hit, attracting critical attention on account of its unusual narrative style and large-scale incorporation of consumer-level digital camera and CCTV footage in the film. *3G* and *Table No. 21* did not do nearly as well, vanishing from multiplexes after their first week. But all three films, resonating with a deep sense of disquiet and foreboding, are insistently marked by the presence of other screen/s as alternate prisms of reality or illusion, indexing the future but with binding ties with the past.

In *3G* and *Table No. 21*, the literal intrusion of the *other* screen into the characters’ lives upsets the normal balance. It disrupts their world, throwing them into a screen-induced parallel realm, where the familiar is scrambled into an unfamiliarity that is strange and frightening. It becomes the protagonists’

challenge to unhook themselves from the screen world that they have hurtled into willingly or unwillingly, and find a resolution to their situation. The mobile phone in *3G* insidiously intrudes into the lives of the characters, unfolding a malevolent space filled with ghosts and apparitions. In *Table No. 21*, the two main characters unwittingly slide into an online screen space as participants in a web reality game show, where a pre-determined format inexorably puts their lives at risk. Both *3G* and *Table No. 21* unveil secondary screen spaces within their narratives that encroach and interrupt the lives of their protagonists, bringing to the surface their deep-seated anxieties and fears about life in the multi-screen digital age. In both films, the screen world is not just a technological feat of silicon and photo sensors for the two sets of protagonists, but a palpable, living entity within which their very survival is at stake.

In fact, in both films it is the *other* screen, 'live' and interactive, that forms the fulcrum of the narrative, pivoting the action of the original screen space. The inciting incidents occur within this secondary screen space, a consciously demarcated territory of action within the main screen space, insistently identified and tagged with its own set of markers from its size, shape and angle to the resolution of the images and frantically ticking timer counters or operating button icons. With a set of actions in one screen space driving traffic in the other, the narrative flow of the three films rest on the integration of the two screen spaces, and the manoeuvrability that it affords to the action in transiting from one screen space to the other. But all three films offer differing levels of integration between the screen spaces, primarily because of the different kinds of secondary screen space that each film adopts within its narrative world, and the exigencies of the storylines woven around those intruding screen territories. The nature of the secondary screen space is thus thrown into sharp relief, its behavioral pattern dictating the 'look' of the film, its narrative flow, and the kind of immersive environment that it can provide.

### **The Intruding Screen of 3G – A Killer Connection (2013)**

In the film *3G – A Killer Connection*, the agency of the intruding screen of the mobile device is overt, as it engages the protagonists seemingly without any human prompt, driven by a self-generating energy that seems relentless, all-knowing, even indestructible. It switches on and off by itself, bringing in images and messages from an indeterminate location and time, terrorizing the young couple in the film and turning their lives upside down. Sam and Sheena go to Fiji on a holiday, where Sam buys a second-hand mobile phone from a local shop after accidentally dropping his own phone in the sea. Shortly thereafter, Sam starts receiving flirtatious video calls on his new 3G-enabled phone in the middle of the night from an unknown woman. Soon, the video calls start showing graphic footage of the same woman being murdered and Sam and Sheena spiral into a frightening world they cannot make sense of.

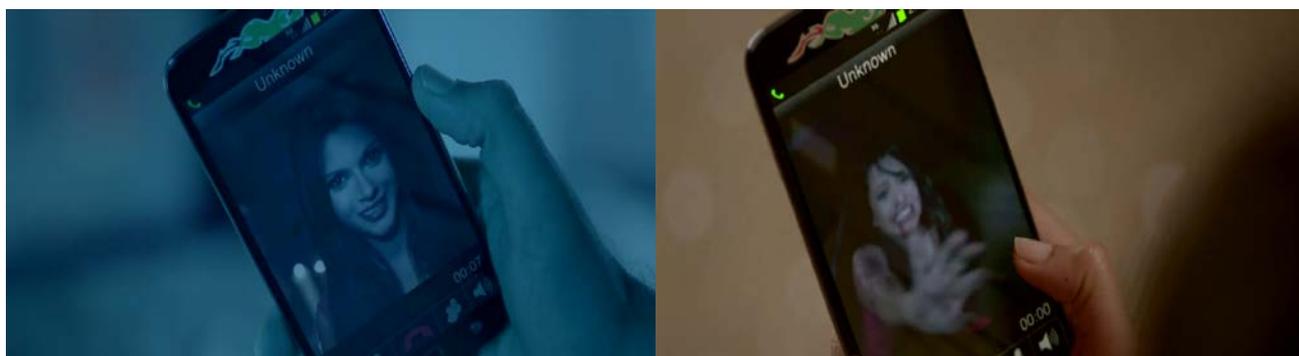


Fig. 25. The ghostly mobile phone, screen shots from *3G – A Killer Connection* (2013)

Sam begins being stalked by the ghostly presence of the woman in the video, with the phone even acquiring the agency to independently change its location; it seems to be indestructible, turning up intact even after the couple's numerous attempts to destroy the phone. Unable to trace the unknown number from which the calls are being made, the couple decides to find out about the woman in the video clip by tracking down the original owner of the phone. The rest of the film details their search,

even as Sam slowly descends into schizophrenia, often switching between his normal persona and a 'trance' state. A string of murders later, all committed by Sam in his 'trance' state, the mystery is finally unveiled when it is revealed that the woman in the video clip was murdered by her fiancé after he discovered her explicit videos online and found out about her double life as a call girl. He films himself murdering her on his phone and then hangs himself, but not before mailing the phone off to one of her clients, setting off a chain of murderous events that culminates in Sam's buying the phone and consequently being possessed by the dead man's vengeful spirit. The film's ending suggests the possibility of the murders continuing, as Sam remains possessed by the spirit of the dead man, Mong Andrews.

In effecting this illusion of spectral duplication, *3G* initially uses the conceptual difference between digital and cinematic space to effect a narrative strategy by which the digital space of the mobile screen doubles as metaphorical space through which the past can be accessed and 'ghosts' laid to rest. Images in digital space are not assumed to continue beyond the frame, unlike in cinematic space where the viewer assumes that things in image space possess a continuity outside the frame into off-screen space. The digital space of the mobile phone is plugged into infinite virtual space, a space that is more abstract than off-screen cinematic space. Therefore, it is apt that it becomes the portal through which the spectres of the astral world intrude into reality. As the narrative progresses, however, the film eschews this stark demarcation and effects a fluid integration between the two screen spaces, with the ghosts of the past gliding seamlessly into cinematic screen space.

This literal transference occurs in two ways. One is the casual popping in of objects from digital space into the diegetic film space. For instance, when Sam is watching a football game on his phone, as he and Sheena are travelling by car, they are suddenly hit by a random football that comes hurtling through their window from nowhere. This recurs in the sequence where Sam and Sheena, again travelling in a car, are involved in an identical car crash to the simulated car crash of the video game

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that Sam was playing at the same time on his mobile phone. According to Persson, in his paper “A Comparative Study of Digital and Cinematic Space”, “[i]n cinematic and ‘realist’ environments the spectator/user is *drawn into* the world that seems to exist on the other side of that screen/interface...In contrast, in abstract interfaces the off-screen information is seemingly coming out *towards* the user: windows and menus *pop up*...they seem to come out towards her” (182) From a soccer ball to a car crash, random objects and events thus *pop up* into the ‘real’ space of the cinematic screen as the protagonist engages with the mobile screen. In effect, in this direct engagement with the mobile screen, the protagonists of the latter space also seem to be able to *download* the digital storyworld or aspects of it, into their own space. With this stylistic materialization of the concept of the ‘download’ that simulates the atmosphere of an immersive digital environment, 3G tries to give a digital spin to a cinematic experience.

The other means of creating a transference from digital to cinematic space is more subtle, as when the murdered woman’s ghost just shows up next to the protagonist Sam within the cinematic space. Her transference from digital to cinematic space is not effected through any overt indication but rather remains implicit. She first appears in the sequence, when Sam, searching for the ringing phone and locating it under the bed sheet, then pulls up the sheet only to confront her frightening apparition. In the next sequence, as Sam and Sheena engage in foreplay, Sam suddenly finds that he is with the ghost of the woman and not Sheena. This is interesting, because from this point onwards, the ghosts also seem to become projections of Sam’s imagination, but less directly Sam’s own than that of the dead woman’s fiancé, whose persona Sam begins to take on in his ‘trances’.



Fig. 26. Ghosts in the present, screen shots from *3G – A Killer Connection* (2013)

Sam's frequent switching to the other persona becomes a device by which the ghosts start inhabiting the cinematic space more naturally and acquiring more agency. In fact, in the climactic sequence towards the end when the couple unravels the mystery of the ghostly phone, the narrative device of Sam's possession by the spirit of the dead man allows a destructive parallelism between the murder of Mong's fiancée, reconstructed by the couple in detail, and the re-enactment of the same sequence of events with Sam's hapless girlfriend Sheena. Thus while Sam as Mong relives the memory of Mong's murder of his girlfriend as flashback, Sam also attempts to re-enact the events with his own girlfriend. Parallel editing creates an alternation between memory and the present, constructing a scene where the past is simultaneously accessed as memory as well as transmogrified into present event.

*3G's* storyline about a rogue phone carrying a murderous spirit articulates an unease and an insistent anxiety with a past that still sits in the margins of contemporary technological urban life. Even with a storyline that stretches the limits of incredulity, the film articulates a schism or a disjointedness between the past and a present that came too quickly. A 3G phone, enabled for rapid transmission of high-speed data, is transformed into a carrier of a malevolent spirit from the past, the mechanical configuration of metal parts inside the phone becoming a conduit into and out of the etheric realm of the supernatural. Technology thus becomes the medium via which the paranormal intrudes into the normal, bypassing the technological gateways that regulate and track the flow of data. The ghosts not only evade control but insinuate themselves into the present and thereby complicate it. In *3G's*

narrative, the past does not seek closure, but instead aims to rupture the façade of the present and perpetuate its existence.

But the sense of disquiet in the film is not only about a present that came too soon without warning. The persistent anxiety it articulates in the narrative of the ghostly mobile phone is about technology, and the nervous apprehension of the ghosts of the past is intertwined with that anxiety. The small mobile phone not only destroys the young couple's lives but also those of many others connected with the phone. Its capacity of effecting wireless transference of high-speed data also facilitates transference of vengeful apparitions from the astral to the material, giving shape and substance to our darkest fears. The couple's unsuccessful attempts to destroy the phone – trying to break it into pieces, throwing it into the sea or leaving it behind in public places – may be seen as the impossibility of containing the technological Pandora's box that has been unleashed in our lives. The mobile phone, seemingly invincible, always returns back to Sam and Sheena, intact and insistently continuing to ring in from some indeterminate location.



Fig. 27. Screen as mirror and gateway, screen shot from *3G – A Killer Connection* (2013)

The smartphone thus becomes the interface between the two realms of the material and the spirit world. As the doorway through which ghosts unspool from their location in the past and impinge onto

the present, the screen becomes a two-way reflector that creates an “experiential collage” (Pallasmaa *The Embodied Image* 081) of the normal and the paranormal, of presence and absence, of reflection and fusion. The protagonist Sam, in his trance state, always see himself as the reflection of Mong Andrews, the murderous fiancé of the dead woman, on the screen of his mobile phone. His phone screen thus becomes not just a portal or permeable gateway, but also a mirroring surface evoking spectral illusions of estrangement and rupture. Juhani Pallasmaa, in observing how “our technologised world contains ever more elements of illusion, immateriality and a-causality”, identifies glass as “the ultimate material of this modern dream world...the source of the illusory world of transparency, reflection and mirroring” (080). The glass screen of the mobile phone, in being simultaneously transparent and reflective, malleable and hard, becomes capable of expressing multiple essences of its materiality. It becomes an illusory landscape conjuring images of desire and fear, of cruelty and horror, of enticement and estrangement.

As a location that externalises the invisible realms of the supernatural, and also gives shape to the internalised experiences of its principal protagonist, the screen becomes a force field of associative imagery capable of inciting a powerfully emotive and affective connection with it. The screen as mirror reflects back to Sam an image that is not of himself, but rather of a ghost, a person who does not exist. In facilitating Sam’s experience of himself as the other, the materially non-existent, the phone screen becomes a location of instantaneous exchange between the ethereal and the corporeal. Whether Sam finds Mong in his reflection on the screen, or gets hit by a random football or involved in a car crash, the screen facilitates this exchange of life force of the physical world with the astral world.

### **Game-Playing: The Digital Spirit of *Table No. 21* (2013)**

In the film *Table No. 21*, a young couple, Vivaan and Siya, win a trip to Fiji in a lucky draw.

Subsequently, the mysterious owner of their holiday resort, Mr. Khan, offers them 3 million dollars to participate in an interactive online game show. The show named 'Table No. 21', requires them to perform a set number of tasks arranged in order of increasing levels of difficulty; the rules of the game also dictate that they cannot leave the show midway. Hooked to lie detectors, and tracked by cameras at every step, Vivaan and Siya start playing the game, hosted by Mr. Khan, and streamed live on the web to the show's 8 million viewers. But the couple soon realise that the game demands more of them than they had bargained for, as the tasks start revolving around their deepest fears and phobias, uncovering their darkest secrets, even putting their lives at risk. Bound by the rules of the game and unable to leave, the couple find themselves trapped in a horror they had willingly walked into. The denouement reveals that the whole concept of the game show was an elaborate ruse designed to trap them and make them relive the extreme treatment that Vivaan and Siya, as seniors in college, had meted out to Mr. Khan's son, a freshman who had become mentally ill from his experience.

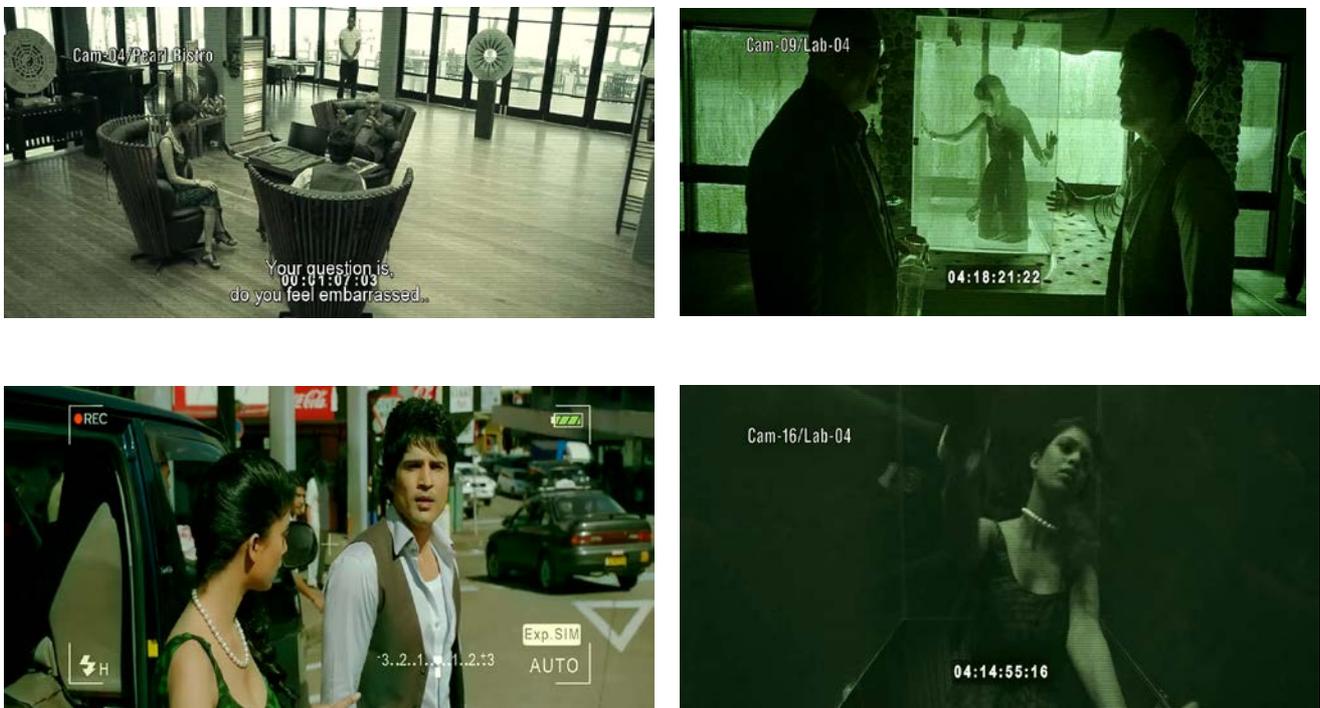


Fig. 28. The 'other' screens, screen shots from *Table No. 21* (2013)

In the film, a string of second screens stake out the main action of the story world, slicing into the cinematic screen space at regular intervals, spotlighting certain sections of the screen action. These digital spaces exist in contiguity with the cinematic space, their borders lax and permeable, allowing the action to transit between the spaces. Two sets of digital spaces can be seen in the film – the first being the digital spaces filmed by the digital cameras and uploaded ‘live’ to the screens of the worldwide web, and the second being the string of digital cameras, both movable and fixed, filming the action and visible throughout the film. Although what is explicitly seen on screen are these two sets of spaces, conceptually the image world of the film extends into millions of screens of the worldwide web, generating an off-screen space that spirals out into the abstractness of virtual space. *Table No. 21* carries this consciousness of manifold screens in its story world, marked by the ‘hits’ scored on the space of its ‘live’ computer screen surface. Just as users of online digital games and immersive environments are inflected by the awareness of a screen-filled virtual space, this film too is steeped in this awareness of an off-screen network of screens, interconnected in virtual space. This is integral to the cinematic experience that the film aims to foster, as the narrative revolves round an online game show played by participants in a simulated environment.

In concept and design, *Table No. 21* adapts a digital game to a cinematic environment. Games in avatar-driven digital environments are similarly designed according to levels of difficulty, with each level demanding more of the user in navigating and surmounting the given obstacles. *Table No. 21* adapts this digital environment to the cinema, replacing the avatars with live characters, and investing the omniscient control of the player in a digital game into a character who owns and directs the game show to its climactic end. The participants’ free will is taken away at the beginning of the game when they sign a contract, leaving them bound, avatar-like, within the confines of the game and at the mercy of the master-inquisitor who takes them through the eight levels of the challenging game.



Fig. 29. Cameras and their feeds, screen shots from *Table No. 21* (2013)

Thus the very spirit of *Table No. 21* is digital rather than cinematic, incorporating as it does the architecture of a digital environment into a film experience, with its scattering of digital spaces from the 'live' computer screen to the string of 'live' surveillance camera screens and handheld digital camera screens. In the first task that requires Vivaan to kiss Siya in a public place, the sequence starts with the three characters in an interior space. As Vivaan, Siya and Mr. Khan, the host of the show, seated opposite each other, engaging in a question and answer session that precedes the task, the scene edits the conversation between them by using conventional shot/reverse shots. But it frequently intercuts the scene with long shots from the surveillance cameras fixed around the place. They capture the action from five different angles, interrupting the smooth flow of cinematic space, their black and white grainy surfaces also detailing the camera number, location and a ticking time code. As the scene shifts to the exterior, a range of handheld digital cameras film Vivaan and Siya as they kiss in the middle of Suva's busiest street. These cameras frame the pair from a variety of angles and distances, their frames providing information regarding their battery and exposure level, their shooting mode, and other technical information. This scene frenetically cuts back and forth between the cinematic space and the gamut of digital spaces, all framing the same action, with movement, gaze and match on action maintaining continuity between the different cameras. In fact, the presence of the digital cameras as operating devices are underlined and made markedly visible within the cinematic space, as the scene involves and integrates *their* act of filming with the main action of the two protagonists.

*Table No. 21* thus structurally integrates visually different screen spaces within one continuous space. The rapid back-and-forth from digital to cinematic space is stitched together by the conventions of film editing, which bridge the spatial break between the two kinds of spaces and generate visual flow. The film underlines the presence of both the digital screen spaces as well as the digital cameras filming them. The former appear markedly different in their visual aesthetic from the surface of the cinematic screen space, and the latter bring to the forefront the presence of their apparatus as essential to the experience of their spaces. In this stacking together of digital and cinematic spaces in its story world, the film thus brings into the multiplex theatre the everyday screens that populate the life of its audience, inflecting the once inviolate cinematic screen with pieces of the digital.

In fact, by entangling digital space with cinematic space and casting them into a spatiotemporal continuity, the film raises interesting lines of inquiry into the nature of the perceptual sensibility that such a visual dissonance generates and how it is fed back into a new experience of cinema. In effect, while the action in the digital space and that in the cinematic space is continuous, structurally threading both spaces, the film plays with the difference in the perceptual sensibility of these two modes by emphasizing the dissonance between the two sets of images. The highly saturated, icon-heavy digital camera images and the decidedly grainy, low resolution, text-laden images from the surveillance cameras are juxtaposed against the low contrast but 'warm' cinematic image. The image world of the series of digital spaces function almost as *hypertexts* for the action in the cinematic space, giving out information on location, camera number, time elapsed and recording mode among other details on its screens. This data-heavy digital space unwraps the artifice of the image, laying bare as it does the technical work of the recording device. Its ticking time code tracing time on its surface makes time visible, in contrast to the cinematographically synthesised time of the cinematic screen space.

This visual dissonance generates 'interruptions' on the surface of the cinematic screen, breaking the flow of the cinematic space. Though the action moves ahead in time, these interruptions open up

windows of suspensions, simulating a sense of recall, of return. As relational states in oscillating space, the two sets of images generate differing perceptual loops through which the spectator perceives and interiorizes the experience. As one set of image shifts the perceptual orientation of the preceding set, these *interruptions-in-motion*, so to speak, produce a perceptual structure in which the spectating subject doubles the film continuously (Bellour 17-19). Thus, even while the narrative moves forward, these recurrent digital doorways ‘replay’ the action in a retrospection of associations, generating circles of extension that radiate out to the entire film, enveloping the spectator in “a mental virtuality” (Bellour 17). It is a re-projection that plays out in the psychic spaces of the spectating subject, as digital space and cinematic space engage in a pattern of intersection. This technological mutation in the film sets in motion a spectatorial reorientation of the psychological dispositions and knowledge that allow the spectator to engage in a ‘cinematic experience’ within the set time of a screening session.

### **Reality Cinema of *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (2010)**

If *Table No. 21* subtly tweaks the cinematic experience with its mash-up of digital and cinematic space, *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha/ Love, Sex And Betrayal* (referred as *LSD*) completely subverts the notion of a ‘cinematic experience’ by bringing in consumer-level digital cameras to tell its story of three interconnected narratives. The conventional cinematic screen space disappears in this invasion of the digital, as a succession of three different digital media, each with its own images and aesthetics, unfold their narratives on the multiplex screen. The three interconnected narratives, themed around love, sex and betrayal, are shot on a digital camcorder, store security cameras and a spy camera, respectively, with the viewer warned in advance in a sort of a mock-announcement at the beginning of the film about possible occurrences of shaky camera movements, low light and out-of-focus conditions in the film. *LSD* plays around with the conventional concept of cinematic experience not just by its complete rejection of film as a medium but also by its refusal to employ the usual cinematic

conventions in explicating its narrative. Its avowed intention, contained in the same mock-announcement, is to present “a new kind of cinema”, which it christens “reality cinema”, made possible by a careful selection of the most “sensational footage” from hundreds of “security cameras, phone cameras, spy cameras, home cameras, secret cameras” from all over the country.

The first narrative, “Blockbuster Love”, tells the story of two young lovers who on eloping and marrying despite the disapproval of the girl’s family, are brutally murdered by the latter. The camera, a digital camcorder, belongs to the boy Rahul, who is a film school student with a penchant for recording his life. The camera remains turned on throughout, faithfully recording the action as he casts the girl in his graduate film, falls in love with her, and finally gets killed by the girl’s conservative family. The second segment, “House of Sin”, is shot through a series of store security cameras placed in vantage positions within a small twenty-four hour convenience store. It tells the story of the seduction of a salesgirl by the store security supervisor who, unbeknownst to the former, secretly uses a store surveillance camera to film their tryst, selling the resultant sex tape for money. The third narrative, “The Fame Game”, filmed entirely through concealed cameras, revolves around a sting operation conducted by a local news channel. A dancer, helped by a reporter for the channel, secretly records a pop star soliciting sex in return for giving her a starring role in his music video. The news channel presses for more sensational footage, resulting in the reporter getting shot. The three stories are interconnected, with the principal characters of the three narratives entering into the diegesis of all narratives at some point, and the shooting incident of the third narrative taking place in the location of the second narrative.

*LSD*’s “reality cinema” favours the darkness of the cinema hall, but eschews both the traditional materiality of the cinematic medium and its aesthetic conventions. Shot entirely on consumer-level digital video, it transposes the Do-It-Yourself video aesthetic that sits snugly on television, computer or mobile screens onto the cinematic screen. Its three stories that deal with honour killings, sex tapes

and sting operations illustrate the conflicts and dichotomies of an urban India trying to find its moorings in the globalizing present. Its topology of interconnected spaces of varied digital video formats from the digital camcorder to the store security cameras to the spy camera unfold a screenscape that is already familiar to the urban Indian. The camera lenses watch, their record buttons blinking red, as lovers and murderers, voyeurs and swindlers, abusers and scandal-mongers pass before their screens and play out their stories. *LSD* completely avoids the conventional cinematic techniques of camera movement and editing that have been used to render the fictive space coherent and consistent. Instead, the camera remains fluid and free-floating, as in the first and the third narrative, functioning as extensions of the protagonists, or it remains uncompromisingly fixed in its space as in the case of the store security cameras in the second narrative.



Fig. 30. Digital camcorder views, screen shots from *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (2010)

In the most viscerally powerful section of the first narrative, where the young lovers are brutally killed, the sequence starts off with Rahul, the young boy switching on the camera in the car to record their going to meet the girl's family. It is dark outside, but the overhead light in the car is switched on, and the camera is placed at an awkward angle after some deliberation. After a brief exchange, the overhead light is switched off, and the camera, though it keeps running, goes to black. A few seconds later, when the car suddenly stops, the screen, which was running black, is suddenly switched to night shot mode (by Rahul) and what unfolds next is a brutality that is gruesome and shocking. As the camera

keeps running, we see a group of men kill the couple and dump their bodies in the ground.

The sequence is set up in such a way that the unexpectedness of the attack delivers maximum impact. The camera, until now, has remained an available presence, handled casually, a close accessory in the character's life and witness to his thoughts and feelings. Its manner has been freewheeling, unpremeditated, unstructured, recording on the spur of the moment, producing a dynamic and restless flow of images on its screen, in a flurry of extreme close-ups, abrupt pans and zooms. This spontaneity breaks when the camera slips out from its protagonist's grasp and lands on the ground with its frame askew. It still continues to record, but the dynamism of the frame is in the violence of the images on screen. Its night shot mode drains out the colour from the screen, capturing the murder scene in a hazy, desaturated glow, the killers appearing as spectres of the night. This sudden disintegration of the image marks a moment when the kinetic energy of the camera changes to a stillness, a physical stasis that is counteracted by the ensuing frenzied movement of the images on its screen. It also marks the rupture of the close alliance between camera and subject, signaling a breakdown, a fragmentation of its earlier design of visual movement and narrative engagement. This break also signals the approaching end of the narrative, as the visible camera settings marking the edges of its screen in a reminder of battery level and time elapsed indicate the eventual running out of its battery charge.



Fig. 31. Store surveillance camera views, screen shots from *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (2010)

*LSD* also plays with the contrast between the differing digital media of the three story segments, highlighting the fixedness of one with the mobility of the other, playing with point of view and the resultant nature of their screen dynamics. The shooting incident of the third narrative, ‘The Fame Game’, also takes place within the diegesis of the second narrative, ‘House of Sin’. The same scene is thus presented twice, in the different story segments, from the point of view of different types of digital cameras. In the second narrative, shooting breaks out suddenly in the small café section of the convenience store, as a man shoots at another man, and the woman who was sitting with the shooter, starts crying hysterically. As the shooter runs away in the ensuing melee, the salesgirl rushes to help the wounded man sprawled on the floor, and the scene ends with the ambulance carrying the injured man away. The entire scene is stitched together from the footage of the three security cameras around the store, as they capture other customers and employees running for cover, and the salesgirl as the sudden shooting terrorizes other customers and employees, but galvanizes the salesgirl to help the injured man and ask for an ambulance.



Fig. 32. Spy camera views, screen shots from *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (2010)

The same scene occurs again in the third narrative, but this time the scene is captured from the concealed camera in the woman’s handbag. The dancer and pop star arrive for their rendezvous at the small café of the convenience store; the dancer informs the pop star that not only had she filmed their earlier meeting, but this one is being filmed as well, using it as leverage to get a place in his music

video. The man pulls out a gun, trying to snatch the handbag with the camera, and in the fracas shoots the reporter who had rushed to assist the dancer. In the second narrative, since the surveillance cameras are static, the movement of the different characters and the rapid cutting back and forth between the different cameras creates the dynamism within the frame. In the third narrative, the action is presented from the point of view of the concealed camera in the dancer's handbag. The dynamism of this scene is totally different, derived from the movement of the camera generated by the character's movement.

The film, therefore, derives its visual rhythm not from conventional camera movements or editing techniques but from the vitality of its screens, a vitality that is almost kinesthetic, existing as it does as physical extensions of its protagonists' selves into space. The cameras swing, shake, get propped up on tables or chairs, carried in bags, hidden between the pages of a book, or in moments of communion between camera and protagonist, turned to face their handlers. In the second narrative, even though the in-store surveillance camera is fixed, the protagonists adopt the camera as a sinuous presence in their lives, allowing it to dictate their behaviour, to shape and mark them. The camera eye is thus right in the centre of things, privy to everything. This generates intensity and spontaneity, the camera as a deliberate physical presence creating a sense of perceptual richness and involvement for the spectator.





Fig 33. A web of screens, screen shots from *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (2010)

*LSD*'s narrative space, spread across this spatio-material arrangement of three different digital media formats, is a frenetic, busy place. It pulsates with the kinetic energy of its watchful cameras, fomenting a definite perceptive as well as a cognitive and physiological pattern in its reception. Digital screens, flickering in the array of devices that the acceleration of new media has spawned, produce new ways of seeing. In the interplay of the human eye and the metadata-driven digitized screen, the interface technology via which this metadata is transmitted to our motor-sensory system generates new feedback loops and traces of circulation. Ute Holl citing Wolf Singer's research in neuropsychology, suggests that the perception of images on the web which depend to a large extent on user engagement is a complex procedure where there is "an ongoing and indecisive back-and-forth between visual data, frame and image, layers and layers of information before an image and a homogeneous field appear" (Holl 166). The 'digitized brain', in making sense of 'fragmented meta-data' "has to make up its mind, taking its time, switching levels, before it decides which *gestalt*, background or movement can be coherently distinguished...(Its) behaviour describes the problem of an attitude within an oscillating topology in a field of vision" (167-168). Holl's exploration is primarily concerned with the difference in the perceptual behaviour between the old mode of watching cinema in a hall, where one is physically aware of the others watching alongside, and the new mode of watching it on the web, where the audience has to stop and "realise that they are an active part of a structure" (168). Holl observes

that the “procedures involving our own subjectivisation have become far more complicated in new cinema”, requiring more processing time (168).

But *LSD* presents a slightly different scenario. In importing digital media into a specifically organised setting of the cinema hall, it changes the psychological and physiological dynamics of its reception. The digital spaces it showcases via its narratives unfold in a different space and in a different context than those of the diegesis. The cinematic experience is generally assumed to exist under a set of fixed conditions: the specific interiors in a theatre (which includes the screen), the arrangement of seating rows, the inviolate darkness, and the uninterrupted time of a screening session. To this we can add the materiality of the medium, and the unfolding on the screen surface of a narrative woven together by cinematic techniques and conventions. The spectator stitches together all these separate elements into one indivisible whole by voluntarily placing her/himself within the sensory-affective matrix constructed by the screen within the theatre, and engaging with it in an interplay that summons the cognitive processes of attention, memory, imagination and emotion, thereby conjuring a film experience that is not on screen but in that sensory-affective matrix where the screen image meshes with individual and collective spectatorial life.

The space of the cinema hall therefore, is considered an important factor in contributing to a cinematic experience, and *LSD*, in relocating the digital environment of its three narratives to the specifically arranged interiors of a cinema hall, allows it to be viewed in the “silence, darkness, distance, projection for an audience, in the obligatory time of a session that nothing can suspend or interrupt” (Bellour 15). The film imports its digital world into the “experience of film (as a) totality of suspended time that lasts for a projection” effecting “in the film an assembling of memory in a sole place, no matter how dispersive it may be or how diverse all the places it invokes” (Bellour 17). In its projection for an audience in the theatre, the digital gets absorbed in the collective social experience of cinema, instead of being engaged in a web-based digital experience, which despite its pluralistic nature of

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being “one of many” (Holl 164), nonetheless remains a solitary experience, albeit one inflected with the awareness of the ‘mass’ viewership.

But even when we agree that *LSD* in its relocation is inflected by the ‘cinematographicity’ of a cinematic setting and undergoes an experiential alteration, the change it effects is actually a two-way process. While on one hand it effects a transubstantiation of the perceptual patterns of the digital experience into a cinematic one by its relocation to a cinematic setting, on the other it also engineers a big shift in the cinematic experience by taking the digital to the cinema screen – both in terms of the materiality of the medium and its aesthetic conventions – for a digitally familiar multiplex audience. In eschewing the use of 35mm film and consciously constructing an image world that is in direct contrast to conventional film aesthetics and grammar, *LSD* moves away from the medium-specificity of film, transposing onto the multiplex screen a digital aesthetic that it borrows from television formats and Do-It-Yourself videos on the Internet.

With 35mm film being rapidly replaced by digital projections and technologies, this has prompted the observation that “film seems to be leaving its assigned territory, the spatial framework of the cinema” (Hediger 62) or the fear that film is in danger of disappearing “into the maw of undefined and undifferentiated image media” (Gunning 48). With this ‘immersion of cinema in a voraciously competitive media environment’, the issue of the materiality of film as a cornerstone of the film experience is a contentious issue among theorists and practitioners alike. The profusion of the digital has led to the investigation of what art critic Rosalind Krauss terms “post-medium conditions”, which redefine the medium “as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical to) the material conditions of a given technical support” (296). This “post-medium” concept avoids the alignment of a medium with its material characteristics and instead underlines the artistic expressions and conventions inherent to it. But while Krauss holds that the medium is only “a supporting structure” liable to be reconfigured by its artistic conventions and possibilities, there are others who argue “that

the formal properties of a specific medium convey vital aesthetic values and do not function as neutral channels for functional equivalents” (Gunning 49). The relocation/reworking of cinematic experience in the age of the digital thus exists in this contentious territory marked by a divergence of views and arguments. While Francesco Casetti argues for the “capacity of the filmic experience to be reborn elsewhere, even far from the darkened theatre...” (“The Relocation of Cinema” 5) others claim that such arguments deny the complexity of the cinema experience, as “the *thetic* experiences of watching a 35 mm film in a theatre, watching a pixilated image on the desktop, or on a handheld device are constitutively different” (Deshpande “Tacita Dean”).

*LSD*'s “reality cinema” thus becomes a resonating space, at once enmeshed in the surrounding cinematic environment of its relocation, and also engineering a shift in the film experience. It brings a certain complexity to the film experience, as *LSD*'s digital cinema is neither just a production category, nor an impersonation of a celluloid aesthetic in any manner. Though relocated within a cinematographic setting and hence part of a certain ‘cinematographicity’, the filmic environment does not completely subsume the phenomenological differences of its varied digital formats. The film may have used digital video to film its narratives, but it does not display the high-definition video aesthetics of the enormous range of HD cameras that many films are shot in nowadays, with precision of details and a wide tonal range even in extremely low light conditions. *LSD*'s digital cinema uses consumer-level digital video, which, while “thematiz[ing] the diffusion of such filming apparatus in everyday life and in social relations” (Gopal 186), also works by re-scaling the everyday digital space into the cinematic space. It opens out the digital world from the intimate, confined spaces of its monitors and devices and projects it into the grander scale of the cinematic space.

All three films discussed in this chapter carry the digital to the cinematic environment, bringing in a new sensibility and aesthetics associated with it. While *3G* and *Table No. 21* bring in digital spaces and assimilate or juxtapose them within the cinematic space, *LSD* abjures the materiality, the

aesthetics and technical conventions of the cinematic medium and instead up-scales the intimacy of the digital medium into the more expansive space of the cinematic setting. The stylistic adoption and positioning of the varied digital spaces within the narrative worlds of the three films points to how this digital screenscape surrounds and syncopates with the lives of its audience. Whether imaged as illusory phantasms or as reframed reality, these digital spaces are positioned at a juncture where they help explicate the many overlapping spaces in urban middle class India, illuminating the multiplex screen in its mosaic of possibilities. The release of these films thus mirrors the intimacy with the digital that shapes the urban middle class demographic of contemporary India, which makes them receptive to a film experience that articulates this engagement. All three films plug the cinematic screen into the ubiquitous screenscape of the urban landscape, thus inflecting the film experience with expanded spatiotemporal coordinates and binding the transformative experience of cinema with the distinct spectatorial journey of the multiplex visitor.

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### **Conclusion**

In the course of this thesis, I have attempted to consider the material, sensorial and spatial aspect of the multiplex as an interpretive framework to explore its screen narratives. The coming of the multiplex in the late 90's and its subsequent rise wrought radical changes in popular Hindi cinema, changing the dynamics of film spectatorship and the economic logic of film exhibition, even as it allied itself with, or rather became an integral part of, the reconfiguration of Indian urban space. As it spearheaded the death of the single screen theatres, the multiplex unfolded a new space for watching films, and a new mode of cinema-going. Architecturally, the space that it introduced in the teeming metropolises of India aligned with the global urban spaces of the western world; it was a space of new surfaces and lines, a new arrangement of depth and layers, inaugurating a new material and sensorial affect for its patrons. Externally too, its transnational architecture staged an intervention within the previous arrangement of urban space, mobilizing a reorganization of the surrounding spaces, its material presence within the urban fabric of the city representing a new order and articulating a new desire. Its sensorial impact within the urban fabric of the city is felt by all, patrons and passers-by alike, as the structures of chrome, glass and steel rise up to proclaim “a break from the past” (Athique and Hill 129) and influence the urban flow around it. The multiplex's presence thus has a symbolic as well as a

sensorial dimension in the context of the contemporary Indian urban space, and invites interrogation of the changes in the popular cinematic landscape as seen through the lens of the arrival of the multiplex.

The multiplex has unfolded a segregated space for an urban middle class audience, who previously were outnumbered among the teeming masses of the single screen theatres. This space, now identified with financial power, social mobility and a global urbanity, manifests this social and cultural imaginary of its primary clientele, fostering a specific cinema-going identity. For the urban metropolitan multiplex audience, cinema-going now entails stepping out of their middle class enclaves or gated communities and driving to the multiplex before stepping into its air-conditioned environment, buying tickets with their plastic cards (if not online), ordering high-priced food from the concession stands and leaning back into their push-back seats in the plush 300-seater auditoriums. The multiplex experience thus ties in with a new way of being, and a new set of expectations. And the films on the multiplex screen reflect and refract this change in a variety of ways. the changes in the popular cinematic landscape as seen through the lens of the arrival of the multiplex.

Thus on multiplex screens new heroes appear, the old is remade and renewed, new locations are explored, and the screen itself is remediated and reconfigured by the imaginative energy of new digital media. These are the thematic veins which structure Chapters Four to Seven of this thesis and inform my reading of the films selected in those chapters. The aim of this thesis has been to explore the films of the multiplex in concurrence with the space of the multiplex. The objective of this interlinked exploration of filmic text and physical space is to explore the visual text as an extension of the values and experience of the space of its occurrence, and to explicate how the changes in this space influences the changes on its screens. My interrogation of the narratives of the multiplex screen is therefore informed by their trajectory toward a particular exhibition space and audience experience. It is this complex intertwining of space and screen that I have explored here, in order to argue that the changes to the latter must be understood in terms of developments in the former. These filmic and architectural

shifts are effected within a reconfiguration of the urban space, the rise of the middle class and its accompanying social dynamic, the spread of technology and the effecting of a whole new way of being for the urban Indian, equipped with a new imagination of the self.

This is an imagination bolstered by more financial power for the urban middle class and greater exposure to the world outside, both in terms of actual travel as well as in the plethora of images available for consumption, facilitated by the acquisition and usage of the latest technology. It is an imagination that is mirrored in the changing city, in the redrawing of its urban space with new structures, and in the new consideration of the self as the global Indian, who sees a wider realm and stakes a claim to a greater imaginative sphere. Space thus becomes a complement to this new imagination, reflecting the desires and aspirations of its patrons, and serving as solid manifestation of this 'work of the imagination'. Appadurai suggests that the collective imagination works with the flows of migration and modern media to craft new possibilities in the contemporary world ("The Right to Participate"). The creation of physical spaces is born out of these interactions and their enjoyment as "conscious acts" on the part of "social actors" ("Illusion of Permanence"). The space of the multiplex with its transnational architecture and interior layout is a product of such influences and intentions, a manifestation of these desires. It is physical space that articulates a connection to the spaces of global urban culture, unfolding a setting for the playing out of a new way of being for the urban, middle class self. Space and screen as adjacent and intertwined materialities thus becomes an appropriate and even necessary interpretive framework within which multiplex films can be explored.

Multiplex films, by their very nomenclature, are moored to the spatial reality of their intended exhibition space. From the very beginning, the multiplex screen has mirrored the conditions of the space of its occurrence – from the genre diversity and distinct aesthetic impulses of the early multiplex films that aimed to satisfy a niche, metropolitan audience aware of Hollywood, to the present scenario where the more expansive address of its narratives reflects the multiplex's spread into the hitherto

considered single screen-territory of small towns and cities across India. Sangita Gopal's classification of multiplex films into first and second generation, tracing its rise from inception to the second half of the 2010's, shows how the filmic changes are linked to the extent of the spread of the multiplex (135-141). When the multiplex first arrived in India two decades ago, it bifurcated the exhibition sector, splintering the earlier composite, heterogeneous audience of the single screen theatre, and engineering the separation of the multiplex and the single screen audience as two distinct social groups. It re-routed the entire production-distribution-exhibition network that was earlier in place, and unfolded new narratives of diverse genres on multiplex screens. The first generation of multiplex films (1995-2004) reflected the rise of the multiplex as an exhibition space confined to big metropolitan centres, while the second generation of films (2005-2010) subtly reflected a more expansive address, as the multiplex started spreading out of the few big metropolitan cities and into other cities (135-141). But now the Indian multiplex's spread is even more wide-ranging, expanding its influence as it arrives in smaller towns and cities.

Chapter Three looked at this phenomenon of the multiplex's larger spread by presenting a comparative analysis of three exhibition sites in Guwahati, a non-metropolitan, second-tier city in northeast India. It detailed the way in which the location of the multiplex has engineered a reconfiguration of the city space, effecting a new urban centrality which has pushed the old parts of the city and its old single screen theatres to the periphery. In fact, Guwahati is now witnessing a further maelstrom of multiplex activity on G. S. Road, its new commercial centre. While G. S. Road already had one multiplex in Fun Cinemas which opened in 2003 (Cinemax having opened in 2005 and then been shut down over parking issues with the district administration), now in 2016 it possesses four multiplexes. In addition to the already existing Fun Cinemas, it now has Cinepolis, PVR Cinemas and a re-opened Cinemax, all situated within a four-kilometre stretch of the road. Cinepolis has opened a four-screen multiplex in Central Mall, hardly two kilometres away from Fun Cinemas. PVR Cinemas has opened another six-

screen multiplex in City Center mall, which is again approximately at a distance of two kilometres from Central Mall, in addition to acquiring and reopening the twin-screen Cinemax multiplex, which is hardly a kilometre away from Fun Cinemas. These multiplexes have changed the urban geography of the city, changing its directional flow and organising a new spatial complexity, intertwining the cinematic with this reconfiguration of the urban space.

The multiplex, thus, is an unfolding phenomenon, as it continues to expand and extend its sway over more areas of India, changing long-entrenched modes of cinema-going. The changes that are unfolding with this aggressive spread of the multiplex work both ways. While the multiplex itself is undergoing subtle shifts as it admits a more diverse audience within its precincts, its architecture is drastically changing skylines in the rest of non-metropolitan India and introducing its brand of globalised leisure. The multiplex's expanding reach has made its screen respond with an expansion of its address and the incorporation of a varied cinematic menu to accommodate the shift in address. In turn, the demarcation between what was considered multiplex films and mass films has begun to blur. The purported demise of the big star action film was met with its return with a bang at the multiplex box office, alongside the staying power exhibited by mid-budget films with unconventional storylines that are devoid of the traditional masala content. In 2015-2016 notable releases like *Piku* (2015), *Aligarh* (2016), *NH10* (2015), *Badlapur* (2015), *Talvar/The Sword* (2015), *Masaan/Crematorium* (2015), *Titli/Butterfly* (2015), among others, could all be categorized under the umbrella term of the 'multiplex film' on account of their thematic, aesthetic and very realistic treatment and tone. But 2015-2016 also saw big budget masala entertainers like *Bajrangi Bhaijaan/ Brother Bajrangi* (2015), and *Dilwale/ The Big Hearted* (2015) as well as opulent mega-budget historical romance and action melodramas like *Bajirao Mastaani* (2015) and *Bahubaali: The Beginning* (2015).

There is also a gradual burgeoning of an earlier shift that saw stories of small town India come to the multiplex screen. In contrast, however, to the violence and lawlessness of films like *Gangs of*

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*Wasseypur Part 1 & 2* (2012), *Ishaqzaade/Rebel Lovers* (2012), and *Pan Singh Tomar* (2012), which represent earlier multiplex narratives of small-town India, the current trend sees a slew of romantic comedies set in small towns. If in *Bunty and Babli* (2010) two con artists long to break away from the confines of their small town and escape to Mumbai, romantic comedies like *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011) and its sequel *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (2015), *Shuddh Desi Romance/ Pure Indian Romance* (2015), and *Dum Laga Ke Haisha/ The Big Push* (2015) celebrate their small town settings. The characters in these narratives are intimately rooted in their milieu, their dialogues inflected by the intonation and cadence of the local dialect, while their storylines attempt to recreate the ambience and mood of their settings faithfully. Their success at the box office is a shift from the earlier metro-centred and NRI (Non Resident Indian)-targeted romantic comedies.

But even as multiplex chains, aggressively consolidating their screen count, are mutating into no-frills versions with a reduced number of screens and leisure choices for small town audiences, the physical space that they unfold for these audiences is a noticeably transnational space, with its distinct architectural style, interior layout and other ancillary offerings of a cinema-going lifestyle from Western-inspired fast food to other leisure choices. It is a space that is designed for a new way of being, guiding behaviour and dictating tastes. The multiplex is now energized by this new matrix of intersecting local and global orders, and its screen reflects a new configuration of images, variously called 'middle cinema' or 'midstream cinema' among other terms, displaying a blending of what film critic Baradwaj Rangan calls the "emotional maximalism" of Bollywood with a more realist and restrained Hollywood sensibility. This effort towards attaining a middle ground is essential, as the multiplex expands and takes in new audiences. In tempering melodrama with restrained realism, in balancing familiar masala tropes with a western sensibility the screen enters to a new register, settling into a configuration that reflects the changes within and beyond the multiplex space itself.

But while we consider how the presence of an increasingly wide urban audience demographic within the multiplex space has influenced its screen, it is also pertinent to consider the multiplex space, so different from the space of the single screen theatre in its material, visual and sensorial affect, as having a unique influence on what transpires on screen. In accommodating and designing the flow of bodies within its precincts, combined with the distinct atmosphere that its surfaces, textures and lighting create, the multiplex space exerts an effect that is distinct from what the audience was used to experiencing within the precincts of the single screen theatre. The multiplex thus becomes a space that not just signifies a set of new values, but also resonates with an affect that dictates guiding behaviors for its audience (Athique and Hill 129-130).

The screen as an extension of this space is part of its affect. Space, in the context of the multiplex, encompasses both physical as well as filmic space, with the cinema hall and the screen interwoven in a continuum to create and produce a specific spectatorial affect. Therefore, just as the physical space of the multiplex is an embodiment of a new imagination and desire, connecting to a larger global space, the narratives on the screen are also energized by a similar impulse, distinguishing them from the traditions and practices of the old omnibus format of single screen narratives, representing a different ethos and a new desire for transformation. The films explored in Chapters Four to Seven exemplify this change, showing how the narratives of the multiplex are staking a different “terrain of possibilities” and articulating a new desire. Chapter Four expressly marked out the different imaginative territory of the multiplex film, by juxtaposing it with a single screen film aimed at mass audiences. Though released on the same day, the two films delineate cinematic landscapes that are markedly different from each other, displaying different narrative strategies and employing differing modes of address to their ideal addressee. In all, the juxtaposition highlights how film aesthetics might articulate with exhibition architecture to create differing phenomenologies of film experience – where in contrast to the single screen theatre, the material conditions of the multiplex space (screen size,

distance and seating arrangement) contribute to a field of cinematographic experience that is quite distinct from the vectors and intensities of the single screen space.

Chapters Five to Seven carried forward this concurrent exploration of multiplex space and its visual text by arguing for a material and experiential account of the multiplex space and then exploring its effects on filmic narratives. Bruno suggests that film and architecture exist within the same experiential paradigms, from the potential fluidity of their essence to the nature of their spatial and imaginative traversal (“Public Intimacy” 20). The multiplex space – the materials it is made of, the way its spaces are arranged, the way it engages with urban space – affects how people inhabit it through movement, memory and imagination, while the arrangement of images on its screens also initiates an imaginative experience that engages similar dimensions of movement, memory and imagination. The thesis thus proceeds from the assumption that the physical space of the multiplex as well as the images on its screen arise from the same impulse and are experienced as coterminous. In this vein, Chapter Five explored how memory becomes crucial in the negotiation of the retrofitted theatre and the film remake, shaping the reconfiguration of these sites in the contemporary imagination by forging a simultaneous awareness of the past and the present. In Chapter Six, the new expanded imagination that can conceive of the far-flung, the distant, the ‘elsewhere’ materializes in the gleaming lines of the transnational architecture of new multiplexes and in its on-screen foreign landscapes, while in Chapter Seven, the multiplication of cinema screens in the multiplex space is paralleled by the intrusion of multiple digital screens into the cinematic space. Chapters Six and Seven thus located the multiplex screen in and as part of a post-globalized, hypervisual and connected world, articulating, in Chapter Six, a new geographical imagination and linking itself, in Chapter Seven, to the digital screenscape of urban life. These films illuminate the multiplex screen as an articulation of a break from the past, arising out of the particular context of the multiplex’s existence. They echo the same ideas and impulses that energize the experience of multiplex cinema-going, serving as frames for the

ideas, desires, aspirations and values of the new middle class of urban India.

So with the multiplex's continued spread, even as we see the concerns of a larger demographic enter the multiplex space, the screen's expression remains tempered by the distinct sensations of its spatial fixity, the space it is moored in and the different set of taste cultures that guides it. While the original "multiplex film" gives way to the concerns of the larger demographic and transmutes itself into 'middle cinema' in an attempt at finding a middle ground between the two different demographics of urban metropolitan India and non-metropolitan small town India, this phenomenon of 'middle cinema' can also be seen as an influence of space itself and its associated taste culture. Even as we witness the multiplex's increasing democratization, it still retains its spatial and material singularity, and its space is inflected with the energy of participating in the transformative moment of a new modernity. It fosters a specific architectural experience where the various elements of "space and material, light and shadow, sound and texture" (McCarter and Pallasmaa 5) come together to create a responsive setting to a changing imaginative itinerary, mapping out a different set of values and guiding behaviours for new audiences beyond the bigger cities of India. Middle cinema takes birth in this intersection between the pull of the familiar traditional cinematic narratives and the demands of a new horizon and a new frame of reference that this new exhibition space creates. Thus instead of giving way to a full-scale revival of the typical masala formats of old single screen films, the multiplex screen is trying to negotiate a middle ground that fits into the perceived meaning of the multiplex space, where a tempered melodrama and Western-style realism can coexist and collaborate to create new narratives. This explicates how spatial conception extends out and shapes the screen.

Spatial conception is at the heart of every architectural experience, and the films that have been explored in this thesis illustrate in different ways how the spatial conception of the multiplex space illuminates and shapes its screen. The multiplex experience interprets a view, a particular way of being in and looking at the world that imbues spectatorial activity with an affect that has a specific meaning.

This spatial turn, bound up in this encounter of our being with the material reality of the structure, affects filmic narratives wherein the experience of space influences the screen into a particular configuration. The thesis has explored how the different dimensions of the multiplex experience – from its spatial layout and seating arrangement to the mnemonic aspect of retrofitted multiplexes, from its transnational design to its multiple screens – are reflected and refracted on its screen in various ways. The screen, sensitive to the physical dimensions and psychological reverberations of its space, mediates this ‘terrain of possibilities’ opened up by the multiplex space. It unveils on its surface perceptions, associations and feelings that illuminate how the material, social, cultural and psychological realities of physical space infiltrate the screen and manifest a specific configuration of images for experiencing the world and understanding our place in it.

## Filmography

*3G – A Killer Connection.* Dir. Sheershak Anand and Shantanu Ray Chibber. Perf. Neil Nitin Mukesh and Sonal Chauhan. Eros International, 2013. DVD.

*Commando.* Dir. Dilip Ghosh. Perf. Vidyut Jamwal and Pooja Gupta. Reliance Entertainment, 2013. Film.

*David.* Dir. Bejoy Nambiar. Perf. Neil Nitin Mukesh, Tabu and Vikram. Reliance Entertainment, 2013. Film.

*Don.* Dir. Chandra Barot. Perf. Amitabh Bachchan, Zeenat Aman, Helen, Pran and Iftekhar. Nariman Films, 1978. DVD.

*Don: The Chase Begins Again.* Dir. Farhan Akhtar. Perf. Shah Rukh Khan, Priyanka Chopra, Isha Koppikar and Boman Irani. Eros International, 2006. DVD.

*Jungle Love.* Dir. Suresh Jain. Perf. Rocky, Ashika and Gulshan. Mayura Films, 2007. Film.

*Khoobsurat.* Dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee. Perf. Rekha, Rakesh Roshan, Ashok Kumar and Dina Pathak. 1980. DVD.

*Khoobsurat.* Dir. Shashanka Ghosh. Perf. Sonam Kapoor, Fawad Khan and Ratna Pathak Shah. UTV Motion Pictures and Walt Disney Studios, 2014. DVD.

*Love, Sex Aur Dhokha.* Dir. Dibakar Banerjee. Perf. Rajkummar Rao, Anshuman Jha and Neha Chauhan. ALT Entertainment, Balaji Motion Pictures, 2010. DVD.

*Nautanki Saala!* Dir. Rohan Sippy. Perf. Anshuman Khurrana and Kunal Roy Kapoor. Ramesh Sippy Entertainment, 2013. Film.

*Race 2.* Dir. Abbas Burmawalla and Mustan Burmawalla. Perf. Saif Ali Khan, John Abraham, Anil Kapoor and Deepika Padukone. UTV Motion Pictures, 2013. Film.

*Shanghai.* Dir. Dibakar Banerjee. Perf. Emraan Hashmi, Kalki Koechlin and Abhay Deol. PVR Pictures, 2014. DVD.

*Table No. 21.* Dir. Aditya Datt. Perf. Rajeev Khandelwal, Tina Desai and Paresh Rawal. Eros International, 2013. DVD.

*Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara.* Dir. Zoya Akhtar. Perf. Hrithik Roshan, Farhan Akhtar and Abhay Deol. Eros International, 2011. DVD.

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