

REALISM AND FANTASY IN REPRESENTATIONS OF METROPOLITAN LIFE IN INDIAN CINEMA

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Literature on cities has since the nineteenth century been centrally preoccupied with one grand theme: the ceaseless conflict of interests between two opposed energies, embodied, on the one hand, in the transparent city that planners and administrators, architects and utopianists dream of bringing into being, and on the other, in the dense, obscure, opaque lived city of human experience. The spaces of the city are a site where struggles between opposing forces and desires, hopes and projections, are played out, confrontations between a governing will and a resistant population or between classes, rulers and ruled. Michel de Certeau, looking down at New York from the top of the World Trade Center, contrasted the Concept City, seen from a godly perspective, and characterised above all by its high visibility, to the city of experience which lies just on the other side of visibility, in the activities of what he calls the ordinary practitioners of the city who live down below, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. 'They walk... they are walkers... whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read it.' The great nineteenth century novels portray this living city, capturing in an exuberant prose, as in Dickens, the density and confusion, the impenetrable complexity of the city, in tales that are often premised on the idea that this is a moral confusion, a failure of reformist will. The anxiety produced by this metropolitan excess gives rise to the figure of the detective, a la Sherlock Holmes, who is capable of seeing through the London fog and reasoning his way through the indecipherable, dangerous neighbourhoods inhabited by criminals, unemployed and the outcast. It also gives rise to the figure of the Baudelairean flaneur, who revels in the city's sights and spaces, acceding to its overpowering sensual effects and thereby gaining room for a private enjoyment of its disorder. Holmes represents the vertical, penetrating, controlling, organising gaze of governance¹, whereas the flaneur resides on the same plane as the others, charting a horizontal, zig-zag course through a diversity of signs and activities that he takes in with a detached eye but makes no attempt to control or clarify.

Another theme that figures equally often in the literature is that of the country and the city, the relationship, both complementary and conflictual, between rural and urban. Here the city's own internal complexity is bracketed away in order to highlight its position within a larger economic, social, cultural and political geography. This is the city as an expansionary force, devouring the other and reconstructing it in its own image. In Henri Lefebvre's words, 'Urban life penetrates peasant life, dispossessing it of its traditional features: crafts, small centres which decline to the benefit of urban centres... Villages become ruralised by losing their peasant specificity.' (Lefebvre, 119).

Two perspectives, internal and external: (1) the city in itself, internally split into a rational grid aspiring to a universal rationality, and the everyday life, with its teeming diversity, which defies this logic. And (2) the city in its external aspect, in its relation to its other, again has two dimensions: firstly, the city as site of attractions, exercising what

social scientists call the pull factor, a place to go to, an object of imagination and fantasy and second, the city as a logic of urbanisation, which extends beyond the territorial limits of the city proper and transforms the other — the country — into an extension of itself, giving rise, as Lefebvre puts it, to a ruralised countryside.

Since we are dealing with narrative cinema and its representations of metropolitan life, it is appropriate that we should focus at the outset, on what appears to be an intimate relation between the city and the logic of fictional representation. James Donald, who writes on cities and cinema, remarks that ‘The modern(ist) metropolis and the institutions of cinema come into being at about the same time.’ Even if it is not immediately clear precisely what significance Donald attaches to this coincidence, I believe it is possible to posit a certain logic of fictional representation, not confined to the cinema but also applicable to it. Simply stated, this is a logic which manifests itself as a limit to representability: i.e., fictional tales can be located in real cities, but not in real villages. Indeed, the vast majority of fictions which take place in urban settings employ the spaces of existing cities, except in utopias which are anyway imagined as alternatives to existing reality. The city, by nature, is capable of containing, without loss of credibility, an infinity of fictional characters and events. This is because a city is experienced as a space inhabited by a population, whose numbers can be counted more or less accurately, but whose mutual relationships cannot be easily specified. In urban spaces, individuals encounter each other as strangers, reified entities, whose position in a social network cannot be known immediately. A face in the crowd can be substituted by any other². A village, where every individual’s position in the social network is clearly marked, has no dummy places, no empty seats where fictional characters can be placed. The fictional village has to be invented wholesale. Conversely, even if one were to present all the details of a particular existing village in a fictional account, the same logic would make us read it as a fictional one, as a metaphor for the village. One of the consequences of what Lefebvre terms ruralisation and the resultant loss of peasant specificity could be that the village too becomes a stretchable entity, equipped with transferable places, occupied by substitutable individuals: fictional characters. But by and large, this constraint still governs fictional representation, making the village a metaphorical entity and the city a space of infinite metonymy. Modern fiction — whether as novel or narrative film — has a congenital intimacy with the urban.

Thus the city is the pre-eminent space of representation(s). It is the seat of power, from where political representation realises itself, it is where the last word on justice is spoken, where the complex economic activity of the surrounding territory is sought to be represented, with more or less accuracy, in the speculations of the marketplace. The city is also, in one of its figurations, a parasitical organism³, feeding off the village but by the same token, it is also a superstructural phenomenon, a representation in itself, functioning as the consciousness of the land, a consciousness which the peasants ‘a sack of potatoes’ cannot have. That is what explains the common sense, productive of many narrative situations, that the village cannot know the city in the way the city can know the village. Modifying Marx’s famous remark, we might say that the village cannot represent itself, it must be represented. In two senses: (1) it must be represented by/ in the city and (2) (in fiction) it must be represented by another village.

For popular Hindi cinema the metropolis of choice has always been Bombay⁴. From *Miss Frontier Mail* (Homi Wadia, 1936) to *Satya* (Ramgopal Varma, 1998), Hindi cinema's narrative geography, which is otherwise extremely unspecific, incorporates, as a significant turn in the plot, the event of 'going to Bombay.'⁵ The city itself figures with varying degrees of specificity, a variance that can be explained in terms of both technological developments making possible a greater investment in realism, as well as the particular genre of film that is in question. A standard device involves showing a montage of Bombay's famed tourist spots and other landmarks as the protagonists enter the city, (eg. *Nau Do Gyarah*), or a more disturbing montage of the city's dangerous seductions, for which, naturally, what could be more effective than a quick scanning of a series of film posters and banners accompanied by a loud and fast-paced Rafi song (as in *Guddi*). The cinema's constant and overwhelming presence, in the form of posters, of songs blaring from a variety of sources everywhere, of crowds in front of theatres—these are as crucial to the cinematic evocation of the big city as anything else.

Paradoxically, the choice of Bombay as the default metropolis in the popular Hindi cinema is indicative of, among other things, the metaphorical status that the 'city' occupies within an imaginary that always, compulsively, invokes the city as part of the city—country dyad. Wherever this paradigm prevails, the term 'Bambai' serves to signify the generic metropolitan other, rather than the specific entity that the city of Mumbai is. The location of the film industry there also contributes to the consolidation of this association, as if reinforcing the metaphorical, symbolic dimension by a self-referential twist. It is as if any other city, even Delhi, would be too specific, too resistant to the symbolic logic involved in the representational practices of popular cinema: to say that someone upped and went to Bombay seems self-explanatory: it simply means that they migrated from the country to the city; to say they went to Delhi or Calcutta is to immediately beg the question, 'why there?'. Bombay is Bombay plus The City. Other cities lack this double status as far as the Hindi cinema is concerned.

Leaving aside such standard minimal references to 'going to Bombay' which are a staple of the Hindi film, we could possibly identify two significant cinematic Bombay's which have a more than perfunctory presence. These two Bombay's have much in common but their difference lies both in their visual quality and narrative functionality. Let us simply call them the Bombay of the nineteen fifties and that of the seventies and after. The relationship of characters to the cityscape, the way the city figures, as metaphor as well as site of unfolding of events, in effect the city as horizon of a representational project: all undergo a significant transformation as we move from one to the other, a shift that must be assumed to relate both to the changing aesthetic concerns of the Bombay cinema as much as to the social transformations that have altered the image of the city in public discourse.

The first Bombay, which the song *yeh hai Bambai meri jan* (CID, Raj Khosla 1956) immediately evokes for the average Hindi film viewer, is a city of pleasure and danger, of a thrilling anonymity as well as distressing inequality; 'both joyous and fearsome' (Kaviraj, 1998: 152), a space where class conflict is a dominant thematic concern. We may include here the well-known examples like *Shree 420* as well as the

films of a group of filmmakers — Guru Dutt, the Anand brothers, Raj Khosla -who specialised in a nourish cityscape that defined one of the distinctive sub-genres of the fifties. Sudipto Kaviraj's essay on the culture of representative democracy offers an interesting reading of the song where he argues that 'it evokes the culture of the first historical stage of modern Indian democracy' (154), showing the representativeness of the Nehruvian democratic experiment (155), contrasting representation in this sense with the more risky (for the elites) prospect of delegation. The politics of representation, with reformist members of the elite constituting the leadership, is indeed a dominant thematic focus of many of these films, even though the Guru Dutt-Anand brothers tendency probably portrayed a less easily reformable world. One can see the reformism at work in *Shree 420* obviously, where the stranger who comes into town becomes a friend of the people. Here representativeness also reveals its double nature: one should not necessarily seek, within the film, thematic confirmation of the elite status of the leadership, since the star system can take care of that requirement when the character in question is a subaltern. But the more lighthearted versions of representativeness, of which the comedian Johny Walker is an emblematic figure, go a long way and can sometimes even function outside city limits as the gaze of representation, as it were: consider the film *Naya Daur* (B.R. Chopra, 1957), where Johny Walker goes as a journalist to the village where a conflict is brewing between the working people and the zamindar's capitalist-minded son. Here, he becomes a friend of the workers and villagers, their means of access to the national press, his sympathy for their cause being somehow reinforced by his song: '*Mai Bumbai ka babu nam mera anjana, english dhun mein gaaun main hindustani gana*'. The anonymous 'citizen' is here sought to be embodied in the figure of the comedian, witnessing the drama on behalf of the Big Other, the Nation. Thus the benign, representative face of Bombay was always present in the imaginary of the fifties, even as the Nehruvian socialist thematics unfolded in reformist tales of class conflict.

This strain does not disappear with the fifties, but with the advent of a new narrative form in the seventies, a new Bombay makes its appearance, more vivid, dense, naked, disorienting. This Bombay can be seen in a variety of guises in films ranging from *Deewar*, (Yash Chopra, 1974) to *Nayakan* (Mani Rathnam, 1987), *Parinda* (Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1989) and *Hathiyar* (J.P. Dutta, 1989), in the eighties to the recent *Satya*. It also includes Elms like *Gaman* (Muzaffar Ali, 1978), *Chakra* (Rabindra Dharmaraj, 1980), *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyun Aata Hai* (Saeed Mirza, 1980), *Ardh Satya* (Govind Nihalani, 1983), *Dharavi* (Sudhir Mishra, 1991) and other films usually assigned to the category known as art or 'middle cinema'. Kumar Shahani's *Tarang* (1984), where the thematics of class conflict acquire an epic dimension and are inscribed into larger national-allegorical and civilizational frameworks, nevertheless manages to evoke the concrete historical presence of working class Bombay more vividly than other films of a sociological realist kind. Saeed Mirza has elaborated a distinctive cinematic portrait of Bombay through a series of films all set in the city The seventies and eighties were a period in which Bombay inscribed itself into the cinematic register of urban life in its own right, coming out of the shadow of the city-country equation where the concreteness of urban existence tended to be smothered under a symbolic representation of opposed values.⁶ The urban, contrasted to the rural in the nationalist schematism of, say, *Upkar* (1967), is recovered as an independently significant object of representation by the

filmmakers of these decades. (Although I will not be discussing it here, we should also mention a third group of films, including Basu Chatterji's *Pyar ka Ghar* (1971), *Guddi* (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1971), *Dastak* (Rajinder Singh Bedi, 1970), which are preoccupied with the problem of domesticity and privacy in the midst of crowded urban spaces. Some of these films are discussed in Prasad 1998).

Thematically while both these sets of films share a preoccupation with crime, poverty and urban squalor and alienation, there is also a crucial difference. The popular genre deals with the underworld, and unfailingly introduces into this world an outsider, usually coming in from the country, who enters the world of crime by force of circumstance and proceeds to leave his mark on it. He is also affected irreversibly as with every step his longing to be reunited with the maternal body, the ideal woman, the simple pleasures of village life etc., recede further into the distance and an inevitable death awaits him at the end. The middle cinema's concerns overlap to some extent with the popular genre, but its world, stamped with the mark of realism, dwells more insistently on the world of the urban poor, their squalid lives and fantasies, the stark contrast between their everyday lives and their dreams of a better life. But here too, the characters seem always to have come from elsewhere. Of course, in terms of the statistics about rural migration to the cities, this is an empirically valid fact, but there is more to it than a straightforward reflection of contemporary realities. It is as if, in both these types of film, narrative agency or centrality of a character hinges on this supplemental datum, as if the memory of a place left behind served in some mysterious fashion to give depth to a character, to provide a crucial interiority without which there would be nothing but a statistical mass of slum-dwellers, indistinguishable from each other and figuring as numbers in some economist's calculations. In a way this little detail testifies to the difficulty that the filmmaker seems to experience in conceiving a meaningful life of the imagination for a second generation slum-dweller or petty criminal, as if when the memory of the original home has faded, the body became emptied of subjectivity.

In *Deewar* a mother and two sons, deserted by the father, and carrying the traumatic memory of the father's humiliation, arrive in Bombay. The move to Bombay is cinematically effected through a calendar photo of Bombay hanging in the home of the family; the street in the photo then coming alive, with the mother and sons now walking along it. The calendar image reminds us that the city, though far away, has a place in the lives of people everywhere, as legend, as utopia, if not a secular variant of those faraway pilgrim centres which everyone hopes to visit at least once in their lifetime. A place known through its reputation and its representations is now the reality that the characters must enter. In *Parinda* two brothers come to the city. In *Nayakan*, a boy from southern Tamil Nadu, having stabbed a policeman who killed his father in an encounter, reaches Bombay and, in the first shot of him in the city, he is outside Victoria Station, walking away. An almost identical entry is accorded the stranger *Satya* in film of the same name, except that this time, the explanatory prologue about the protagonist has been replaced by one about the city and its underworld, in the form of a voice-over accompanying shots of the city and gangster activities, which sets the scene for Satya's introduction as yet another stranger who will enter into this world. This absence of a glimpse into pre-history makes *Satya* all the more mysterious as the spectators are free to imagine any of a range

of possible flashbacks, available from previous films. In all these films, a central character, usually the hero, joins an underworld gang. What is striking about these characters is their intense pathologisation: they are tragic heroes, creatures in thrall to some memory or desire, as if their destiny had been written in one stroke at some decisive moment. *Deewar* and *Nayakan* are alike in their emphasis on the confrontation between community and state, whereas in both *Parinda* and *Satya*, the emphasis is on individual desire and longing for a normal life. *Deewar*, *Nayakan*, and *Parinda* place the characters within a moral framework, accounting for the destinies of the tragic characters to some extent by reference to the morally devious nature of their actions. *Satya*, interestingly, dispenses with this outer frame of morality, thus enhancing the pathological dimension of the character, even as it maintains and successfully communicates to us the relative moral superiority of the hero's gang in opposition to the rival's. Even the fragmentary memory of the village that infused the protagonists with a deep pathos in *Parinda* is gone. What we see, in other words, is an intensification of the pathological element, the irrational dimension, in proportion with technical sophistication: as if an enhanced realism (aided by technological advances) had enabled Varma to dispense with the moral framework. The result is a stark portrayal where, instead of the epic confrontation between the community and the law, which earlier served as the horizon of representation, we are witness to a tragic spiral of events culminating in the extinction, at once gory and banal, of the protagonist's fantasies, as he collapses and dies in front of his terror—stricken middle class girlfriend. Here pathology has triumphed over the reason that the memories of the village represent: a fateful destiny is signalled by the receding memory of the village, but at the same time, our sympathies are solicited with the aid of this testimony to a painful dislocation. For *Satya*, on the other hand, the memory fragment as locus of subjectivity is replaced by romantic love in the present. In other words, what Varma has done is to create a domain of fantasy where what is desired is not the restoration of a lost pastoral bliss (standing in for the bliss of the maternal embrace, no doubt), but the achievement of an impossible 'normality', the fantasy of a romantic union which the objective image-series contradicts at every step. It is through this disjunction between reality and fantasy, which is beyond *Satya*'s immediate grasp, that his character recovers the pathos that, in other films, was generated by the memory fragment.

In spite of these variations, however, the narratives of these films continue to be overdetermined by the theme of epic confrontation between the community and the law. In *Satya*, this confrontation simply recedes into a different plane of viewer experience and determines our reading vertically from outside the frame of representation. The law or the state is figured here as an unsympathetic alien entity and in some films (*Deewar*), the law is seen as turning against the poor after establishing itself through a primitive accumulation at the expense of the poor. The reformist possibilities that provided an overarching framework for an earlier genre of city films has become a vast illusion by the seventies, and the politician and the police are seen to be in cahoots with the developers who are intent on razing slums to raise five star hotels. By contrast, the gangsters, whose personal lives are characterized by an earthy simplicity, a vulnerability to cheap fantasies, the charms of illiteracy and folk wisdom, seem to be on the right side of a higher justice, whose time is yet to come. It is as if the gangster alone retains an original humanity,

acting ruthlessly in his own interest but also instinctively loyal to his comrades and kind to strangers.

From the reformist state's field of vision as the site of representation, the films of the seventies and after throw us without warning into a world where the state/ law survives only as a minimal outer edge of legality, and a radical disenchantment with the promises of a passive revolution has taken deep root. This was the season of the 'view from below', of life in the metropolis seen through the eyes of the underclass, beggars, vagrants, thieves, alcoholics. While the real estate developers see the city from above (typically from the giant glass windows of an apartment at the top of a skyscraper), and imagine slums as vacant plots for construction, these outcasts have another view of the city, which gives them no power but enables them to survive for a while. This trend, which can be seen in *Zanjeer* already, culminates in the figure of the legless Abdul of *Shaan* (Ramesh Sippy, 1980), who speeds around town on his wheeled seat, pushing forward with his hands, a common sight in Indian cities. Abdul sings a song, '*Aate jate huen main sabpe nazar rakhta hun, nam Abdul hai mera sab ki khabar rakhta hun*', (I keep a watch on everyone as I move about, my name is Abdul and I keep track of everybody). Characters like these, apart from bringing a new visual perspective to the city in cinema, with their low-angle views of familiar locations, also indicate the extent to which the formal shift in the seventies was premised on the centrality of a subaltern perspective, which necessarily includes a strong sense of community solidarity. This does not mean that the elite's leadership has been replaced by a more representative one, only that the old reformist leadership had ceased by this time to be effective as a narrative device. Besides, this was the time when the urban proletariat was drawn into the theatres in larger numbers than ever before, edging out the middle class audiences according to some accounts. In particular, it would seem that the Muslim subaltern was positioned in these films as the mobilized constituency of the populist hero. The devices of disidentification with the norm, with the state, which gave the figure of Amitabh Bachchan its peculiar power, were an attempt to respond to an audience that was seen as bound together by bonds of community solidarity.

In *Dewaar* and other films, we see the cityscape invested with new affect, the tables turned on an ideology that had naturalised the differences between the poor and the rich. Henceforth, the skyscraper reminds the spectator of the labour that went into its construction. The publicity for the film generated the widely circulated idea that the real-life smuggler Haji Mastan was the model for Amitabh Bachchan's character. This rumour, for which the film provides very little confirmation, is interesting in itself as an indication of the mood of the times and the new horizon of representation or grid of intelligibility that was in formation at the time. Here was a cinema that, either through the publicity strategies of the filmmakers or through the desires and wilful distortions of the expanding viewership, was being made to accommodate its form to the streetside aesthetics of rumour, populist hero-worship of social deviants, etc. A mythical Bombay kept alive by popular lore and memory is here inscribed onto a film that belongs to the mainstream Bombay genre. Here we must note that although in terms of fidelity to a cityscape these popular films seem deficient, these references to real-life personages provides the associations with the city that make up for the lack. Mani Rathnam's

Nayakan is also of interest in this respect: again a film centred around a gangster figure, *Nayakan* inevitably generated rumours that it rendered the life of notorious real-life don Varadaraja Mudaliar. For all its visual novelty when it first appeared, however, *Nayakan*'s narrative proceeds along a familiar melodramatic route, and there is as much narrative similarity to *Deewar* as there is visual or characterological tribute to *The Godfather*. *Nayakan* is nevertheless something of a turning point in the history of urban representation in popular cinema for several reasons. Its studied evocation of ethnic specificity of the Tamil migrant community in Bombay slums, the underworld don's own home and family, and other features expanded cinema's access to the city beneath the metaphorical 'shaher' of allegorical tales. Added to this was the evocation of a social geography that is part of contemporary Indian reality: the ethnic enclaves within Bombay slums, each with its own crop of representative gangsters (seen in *Dharavi* as well) as well as a characteristic Mani Rathnam touch which involves tracking the destiny of the Tamil in other regions of the nation.

The city slum as site of epic confrontations flourished as a genre for some time and one of its recent examples, in Malayalam, *Vietnam Colony* (though not set in Bombay) is notable for its allegorical — realist narration of a slum community's struggle to save their homes (with Vietnam serving as a metaphor for the internal divisions within the slum which prevent them from fighting off the real estate mafia which is plotting to evict them.) We may note here how the opposition between the Concept City and the city of experience serves many popular films as the axis along which class conflict can be represented. The squalor of the slums contrasts sharply with the clean, well laid out plans for hotels, residential complexes and other facilities with which the villains launch their assault on the dwellings of the poor. Other Elms like *Pyar ka Ghar* (Basu Chatterji, 1971) oppose the reality of the present to the dreams of a more utopian cityscape. Most strikingly, in *Rajanigandha* (Basu Chatterji, 1974), the stable love relations and the comfortable coincidence of urban geography and middle class society that characterizes Delhi (the Concept City), is contrasted to the disorienting, unsettling, treacherous world of Bombay.

The middle cinema examples cited above share the intensification of the pathological that marked the seventies popular films. More and more, the city figures in both kinds of films, in its experiential aspect, and the transparent Concept City recedes into the distance, almost disappearing from view or functioning as the primary weapon of the exploiters. Some, like *Gaman*, bring to the cinema a literary evocation of urban alienation, assisted by the haunting lyrics of songs like '*Seene me jalan*'. The helplessness, the daily struggle, the desperate holding on to minimal dreams of normality, the expected as well as systematic threats to these dreams, the dejection and despondency on the faces of the city's working population are combined here along with the inevitable elsewhere, where the protagonist's wife awaits his return. One important difference that marks the middle cinema films is that here (but also in *Satya*), the realist imperative leads to a loss of certainty about the identity of the exploiters: the sordid lives of slum-dwellers in *Chakra* or *Dharavi* for instance, seem to have their own inbuilt tendency toward disaster and tragedy. There are the politicians, who come and make promises, the developers who survey the land with a hungry eye, but there are no heroes to protect the

victims, nor a single villain or group of them to be got rid of. In *Chakra*, the four principal protagonists are Amma (Smita Patil), her son Benwa (Ranjit Chowdhury), Lukka the petty criminal, (Naseeruddin Shah) and Amma's occasionally visiting lorry-driver lover (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) with whom she hopes to settle into a better life. They live in a slum, surrounded by others who are in a similar plight, on the brink of existence, surviving by any means, including prostitution, bootlegging and other activities. Death is a constant visitor but life goes on. The film takes us from Amma's little hut to those of the neighbours, to the land along the water pipes and railway tracks where the young loiter, to the brothel, the restaurant and other spaces that constitute the neighbourhood. Lukka's melodramatic speeches about freedom underscore the irony of his steady descent into syphilis and crime; Amma's dreams of a better life with the lorry driver seem to flower for a while before being smashed to bits by his employer. The film leaves us with the neighbourhood with a few souls less but otherwise unchanged, as if every event were only a repetition of another, to be repeated again in the future. This view of the slum as a permanent sore with occasional itches betrays, behind the representation, the activity of a reformist agency. In the more complex *Dharavi* the reformist vision is less apparent. Repetition here takes the form of the protagonists (Om Puri) indefatigable optimism. The hero, a taxi driver, along with three others, decide to invest their savings and some borrowed money in a little factory, which gets him involved with a gangster from his native place, leading to inevitable ruin. At the end of a story when having lost his taxi and forced to start life anew, he makes new plans for a rapid route to prosperity, we know through what we have seen of his previous ventures, that this is going to be one more failure. He has daydreams, in which the film star Madhuri Dixit patiently listens to his schemes and boosts his ego with approving responses and gestures of love. Here the realist documentary effect of *Chakra* is supplemented, if not replaced, by a style that emphasizes the constitutive role of fantasy in the schemes and struggles of the poor. The sordid drama of his decline and his wife's attempts to find a new life with her ex-husband are watched over by his mother, who comes visiting from their home town in north India. Again, we have, within the film, the embodiment of a gaze that belongs to an elsewhere, occasionally mediating our experience of the world shown. While it leaves us in no doubt as to the fate of the hero's schemes for prosperity, *Dharavi* is one of the few films in the middle-cinema category which place a strong emphasis on the characters' undying optimism and constant readiness for struggle as the qualities that redeem them from the realist-sociological prison in which fictional representations tend to place them.

In these instances of representation of the underside of metropolitan life in contemporary India, we see, over time, and across different genres, the slow birth of the city as the unsymbolisable remainder from the womb of the symbolic geography, in which the encounter between city and country is the fulcrum of representation. From the pure symbolism of a *Neecha Nagar* to the city that exceeds all attempts at symbolization that we see in a *dharavi* or a *Satya*, Hindi cinema either makes peace with a sociological realism, as in *Chakra* or tries to go beyond it to represent the subjectivities of the dispossessed, stranded in a space that they cannot ever inhabit with equipoise but where they nevertheless wage a ceaseless struggle to escape into utopias lurking in cleaner neighbourhoods or in movie halls.

Consequently, the pathological subject occupies centre-stage within this evolving de-symbolized space of representation, caught up in the cycles of desire, the city serving as the site of movement of this desire but also serving as a relentlessly ironising, demystifying backdrop. The city's changing reality is reflected as much in the characters' disposition to/ in it as in the images of it, which are often shot elsewhere. Changing representations of urban subjectivity are as crucial to tracking the evolving cinematic city as the realism of the image. The realist achievements of the representation of city life contribute to a distancing of the ideal subjects of an earlier genre of films into a space where their ideals reveal themselves to be fantasies. The changing look of the city in Bombay cinema, its increasingly intense realist evocations of urban spaces, has been aided by an assimilation of new techniques and technologies, as well as the dispersal of the representational burdens of the 'new cinema'. The great achievement of this genre, which thrives on gangsters and slumdweller, is to have retained a stark sense of alienation, of an un-domesticatable (historical) compulsion: nothing less than the resistance of the real, a resistance which is felt in the contemporary cinematic image of the city — threatening, seductive, disgusting, fascinating, elusive, and engulfing — more starkly than anywhere else.

Let us briefly return to the two grand themes that predominate in discussions of the city; to wit, the Concept City versus the living city and the city-country opposition. In the Indian cinema, the latter serves at once 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 disillusionment and ennui. In *Naya Daur* not only is a confrontation staged between the city and the village, but this contest is witnessed by an urban representative, playing the 'anonymous citizen', who endorses the village's assertion of its supremacy over the city's capitalist incursions. After the fifties, the popular cinema by and large maintained a loyalty to this consensual valuation in its narratives, until the seventies when, with the rupturing of the national consensus constructed and maintained by the Congress party, the city suddenly re-entered the screen space as a self-sufficient space for the staging of epic conflicts and allegorical narratives, with the village figuring increasingly as no more than a memory fragment, a psychic residue; or as an outside element that threw the otherwise overpowering presence of urban life into some sort of perspective.

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Notes :

1. The typical Holmesian fantasy is that of looking down from the sky at the houses of the city, with the roofs removed to reveal everything that goes on inside.

2. Of course, there is no such thing as a social space without social relations which account for everyone in the population. But the inhabitants of a city do not bear the marks of these relations as openly and readably as they might in the countryside. The city is also structured to provide for spaces where these relations are suspended.

3. In 1890, a nationalist reformer gave statement to such views about Bombay concluding with these words: 'Just as all solid objects possess one centre of gravity, Bombay city has become the ultimate point to which the wealth of this Presidency; or even the country, gravitates If a major misfortune should befall Bombay tomorrow; other cities are going to be affected in the same way that the limbs of a person are affected when his head receives a severe blow' (GG. Agarkar, cited in Kosambi 1995)

4. Since most of the films discussed here were made before the city's name changed to Mumbai, I have retained the old name. For a discussion of the ideology of city name changes, see my 'What the other calls me, a comment' in The Telegraph, 24 Feb 2000.

5. See Gangar 1995, for a comprehensive discussion of Bombay as the city of dreams.

6. Anand Patwardhan's *Hamara Shahar* (1985) and Mira Nair's fictional *Salaam Bombay* (1988) contributed to the elaboration of the city's life on film.