



## Of Recollection, Retelling, and Cinephilia: Reading *Gangs of Wasseypur* as an Active Archive of Popular Cinema

This paper studies *Gangs of Wasseypur* (Parts 1 and 2, 2012) as a definitive text via which Anurag Kashyap's style became particularly provocative and pointed. While a range of films (both directed and produced by Kashyap) seemingly bear a certain 'Kashyap mark' in the manner in which they tackle subjects of violence and belligerent speech with an unpredictable comic sense, I argue that, more importantly, these films work within a particular visual framework with regard to its *mise-en-scène* (including the play of light, camera movement, modes of performance), as well as produce recognisable plot structures (involving capricious and realistic events), settings and locations (like the city's underbelly, police stations, etc.), and so on. Indeed, Kashyap has made a set of films—including *Paanch* (unreleased), *No Smoking* (2007) and *Ugly* (2014)—which deal with similar issues, and explore contemporary cityscapes, especially Mumbai, with fervidness, thereby commenting on urban dystopia.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, these films speak to what has been analysed as the 'Bombay noir' mode by Lalitha Gopalan, by means of thoughtful art and set design, engaging (and often hand-held) camera movements and swish-pans, uses of blue or yellow filters, character prototypes, and reflective performances, which generate a world that is engulfed by a deep sense of disquiet and distress. This paper draws attention to such stylistic explorations, especially

to the ways in which it has developed through Kashyap's recent films. The paper will, however, show in what way the plot in these films are thickened via multiple inter-textual references, which in due course craft a complex mesh of graphic and sonic design. I propose that this pattern of narration becomes effective owing to a forceful cinephila that not only evokes memory of popular cinema but also fabricates an assemblage of reflective images and sounds, and eventually emerges as an active repository of popular cinema.

### **Cinema, Cinephilia, Recounting**

At the time of *Paanch*'s (unreleased) tussle with the censor board (during 2000–2001) *India Today* published an article that compared the film to the Bollywood blockbuster *Dil Chahta Hai* (dir. Farhan Akhtar, 2001), and described it as a significant departure from mainstream Bollywood.<sup>2</sup> *Dil Chahta Hai* (DCH) narrated the story of three friends who live in Mumbai and then journey through Goa, though in the long run the plot shifts to Sydney (wherein the protagonist understands true love). Described as a lifestyle film of sorts, DCH presented a new cartography of leisure which entailed music, dance, fashion, travel, and romance.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to DCH, *Paanch* presented a dystopic world and borrowed from the Joshi-Abhyankar murder case, which took place in Pune during 1976–77.<sup>4</sup> The case involved the killing of nine people, who were strangled by five ordinary art students. *Paanch* emphasised the involvement of the middle-class, and the aspiring youth specifically, in crime and violence, which grew out of a wide range of aspirations and desperations. Additionally, while the incidents of the Joshi-Abhyankar murder cases were incorporated in the film, these were presented as commonplace and accidental events.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the 'noir' style was forged through explorations of two indoor locations (a Mumbai apartment and a garage space) and dysfunctional characters.<sup>6</sup> The main characters, for instance, namely Luke, Murgi, Joy, Pondi and Shiuli, who are members of a band, live in a claustrophobic Mumbai apartment and jam in a garage space. Furthermore, the situations were reframed through an expressive set design, hand-held and swift camera movements, uses of blue filter, and elaborated through a particular style of enthralled performance, which highlighted anxiety and fear. Effectively, a number of sequences of *Paanch* introduced what later became identifiable narrative tropes and audio-visual motifs of Kashyap's films.

While James Naremore discusses how noir has a long-drawn (and non-linear) history,<sup>7</sup> the noir style has been widely practised over a long period

of time, and has travelled across multiple cultures and locations. Therefore, writing about the contemporary 'Bombay noir', Gopalan suggests that these films disturb established definitions of noir; moreover, she suggests that 'Bombay noir' reinvents 'film noir', by mixing other generic elements (like urban fringe films, crime-thrillers, and action films), and are possibly part of global cinephilia.<sup>8</sup> While Gopalan discusses *Johnny Gaddaar* (dir. Sriram Raghavan, 2007) at length, this paper illustrates how Kashyap's films work within the larger rubric of worldwide cinephilia.<sup>9</sup> 'Bombay noir', one proposes, is not simply a variant of the characteristics of 'classical noir'; contrarily, it is an exercise in cinephilia, which provokes dynamic exchanges with classical noir and a range of other popular tropes. In the process, one suggests that Kashyap's films become intensely inter-textual, and intently self-reflexive.<sup>10</sup> To use Kashyap's words:

*Paanch* was a darker version of *Dil Chahta Hai*, *Gulaal* perhaps was a darker version of *Rang De Basanti*. It couldn't get made. Nobody believed in a subject like that, and the ghost of *Paanch* still hung fresh over me. Another year passed. Then, in 2003, I tried to do Alvin Kalicharan, a black, mad amalgamation of everything that comprises a Hindi heartland childhood: *Bal Bharati*, *Champak*, *Manohar Kahaniyan*, *Satya Katha*....<sup>11</sup>

As a matter of fact, a *mise-en-scène* evoking multiple cultural memories is fashioned in Kashyap's first released film *No Smoking* (2007). In the opening sequence, for example, conversations between the husband (K) and the wife (Anjali) are layered with contradictory texts and thought balloons; furthermore, this framework is extended into other spaces (like the office) and worked out through other characters (like Anjali also playing K's secretary). Similarly, tragicomic sequences, and uses of black humour in relation to scriptwriter Abbas Tyrewala, become an elaboration of Kashyap's cinephilia. References to actual persons are a mark of Kashyap's preoccupations. For example, Abbas Tyrewala is the writer of films like *Maqbool* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2003), *Munnabhai MBBS* (dir. Rajkumar Hirani, 2003), *Main Hoon Naa* (dir. Farah Khan, 2004), and *Salaam Namaste* (dr. Siddharth Anand, 2005). In *No Smoking* Kashyap reintroduces Tyrewala (played by Ranvir Shorey) as K's friend, who first introduces him to smoking and then recommends the 'Prayogshala' to him. Curiously, the sequence discussed here opens with a large backlit manga image. The camera thereafter tilts down to show the two friends recollecting their boyhood days. Cut to an inter-title: 'Kyun ki bachpan bhi kabhie naughty tha.' ('Since childhood was naughty too,' [this and all subsequent translations

mine]).<sup>12</sup> A sepia-tinted comedy sequence (set in a bathroom), presented in fast pace and interrupted with canned laughter, shows them smoking, which is followed by Abbas's father entering the space. Suspecting that the two are in a gay relationship, the father is in the end relieved to realise that they were (only) smoking. As the crisis is apparently resolved, the scene shifts to a club in which the same scene is playing on TV, just as K reminds Abbas, 'You are no longer the same, your tyre has gone flat.' In another interview Kashyap suggests that:

I refer to films a lot. Like in *Dev D*, I make references to *Gulal*. Nobody has noticed because *Gulal* hasn't been released yet. The character from *Gulal* in his costume is sitting next to Abhay after *Duniya* song. We did it for no reason. Raja just walked in and told me that he has to make an appearance in the film. He has been waiting for *Gulal* for last seven years, so he just makes an appearance in my every film. He was also there in *No Smoking*.<sup>13</sup>

While Kashyap packs his narratives with many such allusions and personal references, a meaningful framework emerges through films like *Dev D* (2009) and *Gangs of Wasseyapur* Part 1 and 2, in which the memory of popular cinema is used as a narrative device and thus relocates his films within a mesh of popular practices, becoming a powerful mode in due course. Kashyap reminds us that:

Things that you assimilate will come naturally to you. When I look back in *Dev D*, the whole brass band scene is (inspired from) Emir Kusturica, the whole "emotional atyachaar", where does it come from, it comes from Om Dar-Badar—"Meri Jaan A A A, B B B" and last scene, it comes from *Head On*. ... It's an organic process.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, first by recollecting and reworking an existing musical trope from an alternative cult and by mixing it with the sound of brass band, and secondly by using his assistant along with Nawazuddin Siddiqui (an unknown actor at that time) as performers, Kashyap thickens the soundtrack of popular cinema, just as he stresses upon contemporary sound cultures and the many passages of Hindi film music.

Concerning (such) cinephilia, Thomas Elsaesser argues that:

Cinephilia take one, I suggested, is a discourse braided around love, in all the richly self-contradictory, narcissistic, altruistic, communicative and autistic forms that this emotion or state of mind afflicts us with. [...] At the forefront of cinephilia, of whatever form, *I want to argue*,

is a crisis of memory: *filmic memory in the first instance*, [italics added] but our very idea of memory in the modern sense, as recall mediated by technologies of recording, storage, and retrieval. [...]

The new cinephilia of the download, the file swap, the sampling, re-editing and re-mounting of story line, characters, and genre gives a new twist to that anxious love of loss and plenitude [...] *This work of preservation and re-presentation* [italics added] – like all work involving memory and the archive – is marked by the fragment and its fetish-involutions.<sup>15</sup>



*Emosanal atyachar*

A close reading of *Gangs of Wasseypur* (Henceforth GoW), as I shall elaborate, nevertheless, suggests that Kashyap has a far more critical approach than what Elasaessar describes as ‘Cinephilia take one and new’; and, in effect, even when his style is ‘richly self-contradictory, [and somewhat] narcissistic,’ as well as fragmentary and involves ‘fetish-involutions’ (as in the case of *Bombay Velvet* [2015]), the distinct memory of historical events, and its fervent relinking with cinematic memory as well as the reworking, fabricate rich and intricate texts which comment both on social history and the function of cinema within such transformations.

### **Dystopia, Disquiet, Darkness**

I have discussed elsewhere the ways in which multiplexes, located in spaces for high consumption, cater to the ‘new middle-class.’<sup>16</sup> Clearly the multiplexes as an industrial set-up imagine an urban educated middle-class audience,

a section of which is exposed to the world/art house cinemas (through TV networks and easy downloads).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, this multiplex audience, among other things, is also a consumer of contemporary Indian-English writing and world music. Thus, beyond the mainstream blockbusters a new type of cinema, with relatively smaller budgets, produced outside the networks of the large-scale production houses, and involving a ‘reality effect’, is widely viewed particularly by the new middle-class.<sup>18</sup> Described as ‘multiplex-films’ by the industry, these films are deeply linked to questions of class, work, city, gender, and rapid urban developments.<sup>19</sup> Beginning with noir-thrillers like *Ek Hasina Thi* (dir. Sriram Raghavan, 2004), *Being Cyrus* (dir. Homi Adajania, 2005), and *Johnny Gaddaar*, along with *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi* (dir. Sudhir Misra, 2005), followed by Dibakar Banerjee’s *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (2006), *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (2008), *Love Sex Aur Dhokha* (2010), as well as Vishal Bhardwaj’s creative transformations of Shakespearean tragedies, international successes like *Udaan* (dir. Vikraditya Motwane, 2010), *Ship of Theseus* (dir. Anand Gandhi, 2013), *The Lunchbox* (dir. Ritesh Batra, 2013) and so on, such films have generated debates about cinema especially on the digital platform. More important, these films negotiate emergent production strategies by imagining a niche audience, inter-national distribution systems, and alternative exhibition networks (including film festivals, and TV premieres) etc.

I propose that Anurag Kashyap’s films, however, are both connected and detached from this contemporary trend in the manner in which it works beyond the middle-class ideology and extends gloomy noir plots set in the dystopic city.<sup>20</sup> *Ugly*, for instance, reviews Mumbai’s underbelly through characters, objects, speech, and gestures, and thereby weaves a dense narrative through cross-references. The plot of the film deals with the disappearance of a ten-year-old girl, Kali, whose parents are separated. Kali’s parents, along with her stepfather (a police officer), are locked in a long drawn battle concerning egotism. More importantly, in *Ugly* the city is organised through many registers, is simultaneously both visceral and contemporary, under control (through technology and surveillance) and yet remains deceptively outside the controlling power of the state machinery. While surveillance, regulation, and the state’s mechanisms have been critiqued by Kashyap in *No Smoking* and *Gulaal* (2009), in *Ugly* these issues are presented both as a part of harsh routine as well as complicated through insightful commentary on faith or lack of it, love, jealousy, pride, greed, vengeance, and hopelessness. The subject of the child’s disappearance, thus, gradually recedes both from the plot and the narrative as disparate technologies (like land phones, old

TV sets, computers, laptops, DVD players, headphones, internet, CCTV, GPS, iPhones) utilised to look for her eventually become the centre of an otherwise labyrinthine narration.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, some of the Bombay films (meaning films both produced in and made about Mumbai) which were made post-1990 reinforce the noir angst by shifting the city centre—and the locus of the narrative—from *the town to suburban Mumbai*, and thereby re-telling the history of overgrowth. Indeed, one may argue that Anurag Kashyap's imagination and re-presentation of



*PMGP colony*

suburban Mumbai life through a particular style of narration (concerning locations, milieu, characters, situations, recognisable settings, gestures, sounds, etc.) indicate a decisive shift in the locations of mainstream films. The post-1990s films, such as *Dharavi* (dir. Sudhir Mishra, 1992) and *Satya* (dir. Ram Gopal Varma, 1998) mark a crucial departure from the pervasive Mumbai iconography which was produced through a plethora of Hindi films since the 1950s (*Taxi Driver* [dir. Chetan Anand, 1954] and *Kala Bazar* [dir. Vijay Anand, 1960] for instance) and through the 1970s–80s blockbusters (*Dewaar* [dir. Yash Chopra, 1975], *Don* [dir. Chandra Barot, 1978], *Shaan* [dir. Ramesh Sippy, 1980], *Naseeb* [dir. Mamnmohan Desai, 1981] etc.), as well as by means of middle-class films (*Rajaniqandha* [dir. Basu Chatterjee, 1974], *Gaman* [dir. Muzaffar Ali, 1978], *Ghar* [dir. Manik Chatterjee, 1978], *Gharaonda* [dir. Bhimsain Khurana, 1978], *Manzil* [dir. Basu Chatterjee, 1979], and so on). Thus, VT station, Marine Drive, Worli Sea Face, the Kala Ghoda area, the Mumbai Taj hotel, the Fort area, Metro cinema etc. recede to draw attention to spaces of new habitations, like Andheri East in *Ugly*.<sup>22</sup>

Speaking about the forceful refiguration of the swelling city, Kashyap suggests that:

I used to live in PMGP colony in Andheri East, Mumbai. I have seen this world very closely. People such as Imtiaz Ali, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Ashutosh Rana and Kumud Mishra have all lived there once. I have a lot of friends who are still struggling, they come to Mumbai to make it big in the film industry and when they don't, they refuse to let go. Rahul Bhat, who had led that life, was my muse for *Ugly*...<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, in *Paanch* as well, Kashyap seemingly struggled with many such thematic and stylistic fascinations, and in retrospect the film helps us locate his later films within a specific aesthetic and ideological framework. Moreover, it encourages us to connect his oeuvre with the works of some of his associates and contemporaries (namely Ram Gopal Varma and Vishal Bhardwaj).<sup>24</sup> For instance, the song 'Paka Mat' with the line '...Baithja yehin, tu ja maat/ghin aati hai, tu khuja maat' ('Sit here, don't get going/ don't scratch, it's disgusting') from *Paanch*, composed by Vishal Bhardwaj, evokes the memory of the song 'Kallu mama' from the momentous film *Satya*, and thereby underscores Bhardwaj's own musical arrangements, instrumentation, uses of unconventional voices, and tonal quality. Furthermore, while Kashyap had written the screenplay of *Satya*, Bhardwaj had composed the music of the film. Likewise, while Bhardwaj had also produced *No Smoking*, Kashyap has been unapologetic about the ways in which his own anxieties have produced his stories.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, there are the choices of a range of locations (Dharavi, Mumbai or Paharganj, Delhi, for instance), situations (set in a police station, for example), characters (social outsiders), and particular actors which speak to each other and return like motifs. For example, the actor Tejaswini Kolhapure, who plays the so-called femme fatale in *Paanch* (and eventually gets her partners killed, also gets all the money, and even becomes a rock star), is brought back by Kashyap in *Ugly*. Therefore, one may suggest that Shiuli of *Paanch* (or the enchantress) reappears as the repressed and battered Shalini in *Ugly* (who seduces her husband's friend) and *en fin* betrays her father, husband, and daughter in her desperate attempt to acquire freedom. Besides, the ending of *Ugly*, in which the failed B-movie actor Rakhee gets the money, reminds one of Kashyap's unreleased film *Paanch* and his fascinations with noir subjects.

In a similar vein, *No Smoking* becomes a reflection on Kashyap's own deteriorating personal relationships.<sup>26</sup> K (K for 'Kashyap', and K for 'Kafka'),



him to locate K's tape amongst a range of other tapes, including those of 'Kay Kay Menon', 'K. L. Shaigal', 'Kunti Shah' and so on. Additionally, as the anxiety about surveillance continues, K finally escapes from the ghetto/Dharavi/Prayogshala and lights a cigarette while driving his car. At this moment, an enormously powerful bang splits the windscreen and yet, at that point K's hearing abilities become impaired. The 'silent' scene accentuates the density of sounds—of cars and people moving, glass breaking, people shouting, police talking, lighter clicking—and produces a forceful picture of everyday Mumbai. *No Smoking* highlights Kashyap's passionate engagements with cinematic narratives and design, which include creation of evocative locations, settings, movement, edit styles, music, sound, and noise.

### **The mesh of memory**

*Gangs of Wasseypur* Part 1 and 2 are based on the crimes committed by the coal mafia and politicians of Dhanbad, Jharkhand (formerly part of Bihar). The film is set in a quasi-real space called Wasseypur, and emphasises the power struggles over coalmines, which are intricately linked to political tussles. The film connects this larger backdrop with personal stories of vengeance that span over three generations. The film begins in the early 1940s and narrates the growth of the coal business through the 1960s, and through the deep-seated conflicts that continues into the mid-1990s it explores powerful characters, namely Shahid Khan, Sardar Khan, Faizal Khan, and Ramadhir Singh. While the story begins with Shahid Khan and narrates his rise as the chief of coalmine labourers, his murder forces his very young son, Sardar Khan, to flee from home. Sardar grows up nurturing vengeance and swears not to grow his hair until he kills Ramadhir Singh, the man who killed his father and is now a political leader. While Sardar is mercilessly killed at the end of Part 1, his second son Faizal eventually fulfills the vendetta by effectively wiping out an entire community. The film also demonstrates the gradual foray of businessmen and smugglers into politics and crime, while the plot is laced with situations of formidable violence and bloodshed. In addition, the film also comprises zestful characters and faces, comic interjections, as well as Anurag Kashyap's stylistic digressions, and a soundtrack, which was produced through a compelling association with local elements.

GoW, thus, does not simply indulge in recreating a period or refer to older films to tell the story; contrarily, Kashyap bring together a range of disconnected elements and fragments of sounds and thereby refashions a past in order to comment on the present. For instance, the settings and

interior spaces (which incorporates gadgets like the stove, thereafter the freezer, vacuum cleaner, and other everyday household objects), as well as the exteriors (chalked out by the iconic Ambassador cars), and a range of locations of the suburban towns complicate structures of ‘period’ films.<sup>27</sup> In the song ‘Kaala re’, for instance, Kashyap presents both Faizal Khan’s growing stature (along with Nawazuddin Siddiqui’s perhaps), and through the inclusion of the pager as a specific element of the *mise-en-scène* draws attention to a crucial transformation in media cultures and technologies.

Kashyap is a self-confessed fan of Amitabh Bachchan’s on-screen persona (as evident in his short in *Bombay Talkies* [2013]). This star persona of Amitabh Bachchan has developed over the years through a series of texts and is recognised through an ambiguous tragic aura, brooding intensity, forbidding anger, an Oedipal obsession for the mother, a specific type of compassion which allows him to shed a tear, as well as a proletariat identity with leadership capabilities (although, being somewhat detached from his own class, the character is a loner).<sup>28</sup> A larger social suffering is arguably physically borne in films like *Deewar*, *Trishul* (dir. Yash Chopra, 1978), *Kaala Patthar* (dir. Yash Chopra, 1979), and *Agneepath* (dir. Yash Chopra, 1990). Such tropes refigure as a crucial narrative device in GoW. Indeed, the memory of the star persona of Bachchan figures as a powerful structural device by means of which the narrative unfolds. Moreover, by weaving a mesh of cross-references, Kashyap crafts a potent story that comments both on public cultures and its significance within social histories.

In one of the crucial murder sequences of GoW 2, for example, after Faizal Khan begins to attain public approval by chopping off the head of his friend Fazlu, the Bachchan framework emerges as a powerful grid. Thus, at the point Fazlu celebrates his win at the local elections, Faizal goes to his place and shares a puff. Faizal says, ‘I use to think, I am Bachchan [...] but I figured out that I am only a supporting actor.’ Yet, to reinstate himself as a masculine figure, Faizal slits Fazlu’s throat instantaneously. Truly, through GoW Kashyap makes several extraordinary connections between a withering state, masculinity, power, violence, bloodshed, anguish, political history, and memory, and elaborates the same through popular tropes. This frame of the towering masculine persona, around which the narrative develops is in fact introduced at the point Faizal returns as an adult, when he has been already interpolated into the star persona. The *Trishul* plot (concerning an estranged father–son relationship) seems to mirror his story and eventually becomes a compelling tool that drives the narrative forward. Thus, at the point Faizal

begins to trade with guns, that is, during his return journey from Banaras by train, he encounters a Bachchan lookalike. Facing each other, Faizal and the unknown character seemingly pause to reflect upon such uncanny cultural phenomena. Even the self-inflicted suffering of Nasir (the narrator of the film), caused by repeated slashing, refers to the Amitabh Bachchan starrer *Mahan* (dir.

S. Ramanathan, 1983). Moreover, such evocations clearly expand the issue of cinematic past and its significance as cultural practice.



*Faizal and Bachchan-lookalike face each other*

While references to popular films as a historical index is commonplace, explorations of such elements as narrative strategy are crucial aspects of Kashyap's style. Beginning with his tribute to the Madurai Triumvirate, by referring to various sub-cultural elements, as and by deploying Yashpal Sharma's performances at key points in the film, Kashyap produces a rather knotty structure. In fact, the major characters are modeled—or model themselves—on popular action heroes like Salman Khan and Sanjay Dutt, just as specificities of their star-personas provoke a range of actions.<sup>29</sup> Such intricate plotting becomes consequential as we see Definite's (Sardar Khan's son, Faizal's half-brother) story in *GoW 2*, and connect his fascination for Salman Khan with the visual quotations



*Faizal and Bachchan-lookalike face each other*

conjured at the point Sardar is killed in GoW 1. While Durga, Definite's mother, is instrumental in killing Sardar, the poster of *Maine Pyar Kiya* (dir. Sooraj Barjatya, 1989) used at the juncture this news arrives home functions as a visual sign which enables us to read the Salman Khan trope as a useful tool with a narrative import. Indeed, through such evocations, and through Faizal's desperations to perform 'Bachchan', socio-political complexities of the 1980s surface and appear like a meaningful context vis-à-vis which one may comprehend the present.

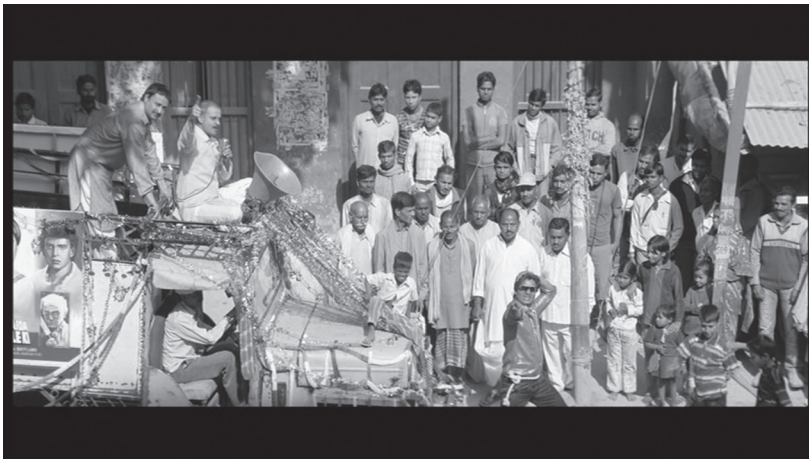
### **Music as memory**

In order to understand GoW's explorations into music, sound, noise, and its series of musical quotations, it is crucial to consider the moments of transformation and the technological shifts which took place during the 1980s. With the introduction of new technologies, the use of traditional instruments and recording of live orchestra gradually decreased. Electronic keyboards, sequencers, and synthesisers did not simply change the processes through which music was produced, it effectively changed the tonal quality of Hindi films. In the later period, digital samplers recreated the sound of traditional strings and percussions. While one may argue that it was R. D. Burman's musical compositions (often borrowing African percussion and Latin American strings) that signified the 'radical new versions of pleasure, sexuality, and desire' of the '70s (Sen [2008] 95) it was the music of *Disco Dancer* (dir. Babbar Subhash, 1982), created by Bappi Lahiri, that stressed upon the 'vast network of inflows and outflows'<sup>30</sup> and drew attention to emergent cassette cultures.<sup>31</sup> Briefly put, the new industrial conditions of the 1980s, with its technological transformations, changed ways in which music was produced and consumed.

In *Disco Dancer*, for instance, while at the level of the plot the hero fights his rich opponent to become a successful singer, the uses of disco music as a narrative element is significant. The film presents a unique sequence in which an entire action sequence is choreographed and edited to match the musical beat. Moreover, the use of starburst filters (to enhance the lighting) creates an impression of disco on the streets, and the mood of dance in a fight sequence.<sup>32</sup> Such scenes showcasing the disco highlight the shifts from melodic musical structures to abstract and mechanically produced musical tracks. Interestingly, Kashyap and the music director of the film, Sneha Khanwalkar, reinvent such musical notes and its cultural memory in order to

stress upon its significance as well as to produce a trajectory that initiates a vibrant dialogue with pre-Bollywood Hindi films.<sup>33</sup>

In *GoW*, thus, Kashyap evokes the memory of multiple music cultures, specifically, the memory of disco. For instance, the film *Kasam Paida Karne Wale Ki* (dir. Babbar Subhash, 1984) had featured a song ‘Jeena Bhi Kya Jeena’ (‘How do I live’) that was apparently modeled on Michael Jackson’s music video ‘Thriller’. This film was part of a trilogy also comprising *Disco Dancer* and *Dance Dance* (dir. Babbar Subhash, 1987). Moreover, Mithun Chakraborty,



*Kasam Paida Karne Wale Ki*

the lead actor in all three films, was described as the poor man’s Bachchan by the press, as well as India’s Michael Jackson because of his dancing skills. The title song of the film becomes crucial in the way it is reused at a crucial moment in *GoW*, that is, at the point Sardar Khan decides to directly confront Ramadhir Singh. This song, performed by a Mithun Chakraborty lookalike, makes the sequence both intensely comic and emotionally tense; in addition, it indicates the impending violence. In order to underline cinematic tension and suspense, Kashyap interrupts the song with Sardar Khan’s voice, and his unabashed warning that he will bomb the area, and will make Ramadhir Singh’s entire family dance like courtesans, which is enhanced through the loudspeaker effect. Such repeated applications of contrapuntal music and sounds and uses of songs of existing films in sequences dealing with action/grief/romance make Kashyap’s films complex texts that draw attention to larger themes of maldevelopment and decolonisation.

GoW 1 ends with Sardar Khan's ruthless murder, which is composed, by and large, from a low-angle while time is stretched through slow motion. More important, this moment of terrible loss is reinforced by means of one of the most memorable songs of the film ('Jiya Ho Bihar ke Lala' ['Long live son of Bihar']).<sup>34</sup> As the song that celebrates life plays on with pronounced robustness, Sardar Khan emerges from the car with a bullet in his head. And yet GoW 2, which opens with the dead body of Sardar Khan, transforms this situation into a tragicomic one by involving the theatre actor Yashpal Sharma, who performs the popular number 'Yaad Teri Ayegi' ('Your memory will return'). The use of this popular song, albeit from the unsuccessful 1980s film *Ek Jaan Hain Hum* (dir. Rajiv Mehra, 1983), is indeed intriguing.

In a similar vein, after the tragic killing of Sardar Khan's eldest son, Danish, the song 'Teri Meherbaniya' ('Your Kindness') is performed prior to the burial. The film *Teri Meherbaniyan* (dir. K. C. Bokadia, 1985) narrated a revenge story of a dog, which waits to hit back following the murder of



*Teri Meherbaniya and the revenge of the underdog*

his master. In the original song ('Teri Meherbaniyan') the dog appears to be shedding tears silently, while the song plays in the background.<sup>35</sup> The recall of such camp elements clearly illustrates Kashyap's schema and the experiences he hopes to evoke and comment upon.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Yashpal Sharma is used thrice in GoW and also performs the cult song 'Salam-e-Ishq Meri Jaan' ('My dear, this greeting of love') from the film *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (dir. Prakash

Mehra, 1978) in both male and female voices. This situation again is taut with impending violence and suggestions of a new relationship between two hostile groups. Furthermore, the song playing in the background inspires Faizal to fall in love with Mohsina. Through such explorations, GoW offers alternative images of our political-cultural everyday, maps the densities of socio-economic changes, and also highlights the function of popular culture within such transformations. Thus by reclaiming an existing soundtrack like 'Salam-e-Ishq Meri Jaan' and mixing it with the sound of a brass band, Kashyap enriches the sonic environment of Hindi films, just as he stresses upon contemporary sound cultures and its many passages. Consequently, the music of GoW drifts away from digitally cleaned soundtracks and, as an alternative, it layers such melody and beats with noises and voices of many orders.<sup>37</sup>

Sneha Khanwalkar, the music director of GoW, has played a noteworthy role in changing perceptions of Hindi film music by digitally mixing disparate noises, sounds of local instruments, and voices of untrained singers to produce a heavily treated soundtrack. It is well known that Khanwalkar travelled across Bihar and the Hindi heartland to collect music and sounds for the film. This attempt, however, is preceded by Khanwalkar's other projects. The song 'Jugni' from the film *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* is another example of the manner in which she mixes tracks by bringing together local melody, voices, and internationally popular forms like rap. Khanwalkar and Kashyap (as in the case of *Dev D*, with music director Amit Trivedi) have a longer history of working with noise, and intercepting music and melody with speech and other kinds of sounds.<sup>38</sup>

This process of collating sounds, which may be thereafter electronically processed to the extent that they may eventually become unrecognisable, needs to be relocated within a larger history of global networks and circulation of local material through transnational flows.<sup>39</sup> For instance, while the MTV-style reinvention of local spaces and sounds is more than a decade old, Khanwalkar's engagement is crucial in the way she connects such experimentations with the soundscape of mainstream Hindi films. Moreover, as discussed by Jayson Beaster-Jones in his book-length study, while borrowing of musical notes and creative uses of environmental sounds have a longer history<sup>40</sup> (especially when we consider R. D. Burman's music), the uses of untrained voices and local sounds alongside contradictory images create a spectrum of dynamic codes.

One of the most popular songs of GoW, 'Womaniya', was created in Patna with two local singers, Rekha Jha and Khushboo Raj. Likewise, the chorus singers who were formally untrained women, were found in the premises of a temple. The timbres of their voices provide a contrast to the use of professional playback singers in mainstream Hindi films. Jha's style, as stated by Khanwalkar in the 'video about the making of the song, is restrained, having 'a very sweet tongue, but very sharp voice'. However, the voice of the second singer, Khushboo Raj, who came from Banaras, is described by Khanwalkar as 'bold and boisterous' and particularly different from Jha's style of singing. This contrast in their styles added to the fervour of the song for 'they were two different kinds of womaniyas'. In the video, Khanwalkar also explains how the term 'womaniya' is a common expression in the state of Bihar and how the rest of song was created around it.<sup>41</sup> As a matter of fact, the video presents Rekha Jha singing in high pitch and out of tune. While Khanwalkar reacts to this, she in fact retained it, as well as other glitches in the final production.

The differences in the styles of performance between Jha and Raj were effective in portraying the conflicts between the two women in Sardar Khan's life. While Nagma, his first wife, is from his community, the second wife Durga, a Bengali and a Hindu, is deeply jealous, and framed in a way (through persuasive close-ups) which project her voluptuousness. Durga eventually betrays Sardar Khan and is instrumental in his killing. Likewise, it is her son, Definite, who inherits the empire. In a roundtable presentation in January 2015, Khanwalkar narrated how even after they had produced the song, Kashyap was unsure about its use in the film.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the song was deployed at the juncture at which hypersexual Khan is drawn towards the excessively attractive Durga. Contrarily, Durga's intentions are unclear, which is accentuated through the song. The visual design particularly is crucial in this scene. For example, Kashyap's slow rhythm (focusing on Sardar Khan bathing in his underwear) as well as the mounting, involving Sardar's gaze that frames Durga's figure, effectively explore the intensities of the song and connects it to the larger themes of the film.

The other popular song from GoW 2, 'Taar Bijli Se', was sung by Sharada ji (a relatively well-known singer, who was recommended by Kashyap). 'Taar bijli se patle hamare piya' ('My lover is skinnier than an electric wire') is a variation of local marriage songs performed especially during pre-marital ceremonies like the *sangeet*. Nonetheless, the song is not rhythmically structured as much as it involves piercing melodies. The traditional text

illustrates a bride's complaints towards her in-laws about her husband's supposed sexual incapability. However, the makers (Khanwalkar and Varun Grover, the lyricist) found this form repetitive, and subsequently added layers of meaning and transformed it into a lament about Bihar. Moreover, during such ceremonies the beat is often maintained by hitting a spoon on percussion instruments; eventually, such sounds (and women uttering 'tatak tatak') were created for the song. The recording also captured music played by local musicians (like Sitaram ji of All India Radio, Patna), and songs performed by untrained voices who sang while dancing, thereby adding the noise of their bangles jingling to the track.<sup>43</sup> Effectually, the song subverts practices of ceremonial performances, and also remarks on the ways in which *sangeet* rituals have been often portrayed in mainstream Hindi films.<sup>44</sup> In keeping with Kashyap's style of double-entendre, with uses of lyrics like 'Sir, you have sold my love (Bihar) along with the coal' the song transmutes into a strident cry and enquires about the underdevelopment in the state of Bihar. If the application of the song 'Jiya Ho Bihar ke Lala' (sung by Manoj Tiwari) produced passionate and yet dark ironic tones, then 'Taar Bijli', a marriage song, turns into a lament about Bihar and Jharkhand's contemporary state.

Khanwalkar suggests in the same video that Kashyap was initially unconvinced with the chorus's performance and enquired 'Why are they so happy?' 'Taar Bijli Se' or 'Electric Wire' (referred to as the 'Electric



*Taar Bijli* and sound of "tatak-tatak"

Piya [Lover]' song), generally performed for marriage ceremonies, signifies Faizal Khan's sexual prowess along with his crisis. Hence, 'Taar Bijli' has a second version ('Electric Piya Fused') that is composed in a faster tempo and

includes another set of lyrics, while retaining the basic musical structure, rhythm, and rhyme patterns of the first version. The second version is heard when Samshad Alam (a middle-man of sorts), becomes Faizal Khan's trusted man, which signposts Faizal's gradual degeneration. Consequently, Alam, his men, and the police dance in frenzy (with guns and skewers) around a transgendered dancer, in a space that is lit with multi-coloured tube lights, thereby projecting utter unruliness.

### **Memory of images: Shree 420 in Bombay Velvet**

While GoW comprises a number of other nuanced refigurations of voices and sounds, as well as startling juxtapositioning of songs and sounds with action and violence, one may conclude by pointing out the manner in which such cinephilia may function as a method of rewriting the history of cinema. Kashyap's latest film *Bombay Velvet* (2015) for example, has generated a range of debates in the manner in which it recreated scenes from noir and gangsters films, and the ways in which the film, set in Bombay (Mumbai) in the 1950s-60s, indulged in referencing situations (like boxing), iconography (such as tommy guns) and music (especially jazz) from iconic Hollywood films. Gyan Prakash, the writer of the film, nevertheless, mentioned that:

I was interested in the history of tabloid. The tabloid is a very urban form. I found microfilms of Blitz Bombay's first tabloid, dating back to 1941. [...] there were tabloids which also gave interesting perspectives about the city. Blitz had heavily invested in following the Nanavati case in the 1960s. That became a way for me to tell a story. [...] Blitz focussed largely on the visual expression of the story. They presented graphic representations of the case, showing how Prem Ahuja was killed. It fascinated me. It said something about the city.<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, such 'visual expressions' and popular images are transformed into the 'Sylvia' song in the film which underscores Bombay's glitz and tabloid imaginations regarding the city. Additionally, I would like to draw attention to the song 'Fifi', which is a recreation (composed by Mikey McCleary) of the well-known Geeta Dutta song 'Jata kahan hain dewaane' (music by O. P. Nayyar) from one of the early noir films *C.I.D.* (dir. Raj Khosla, 1956). The original song, the soundtrack of which has circulated in the public domain over decades, was censored and taken out of the film. It was apparently censored for the suggestive lyrics (by Majrooh Sultanpuri), and especially for the expression 'Fifi'. Thus, in actuality, there is no 'Fifi' song in the film *C.I.D.* Consequently, by (re)imagining visuals for a long

existing (rather, lost) song, Kashyap effectively brought back the track into contemporary public discourses and cultures. Indeed, in *Bombay Velvet* such references are quite a few and are intensely complex because of the multiple allusions. By locating and suturing such fragments of cinematic experiences, by reinventing and reframing such elements, and thereby connecting them with popular perceptions and memory of past events, Kashyap galvanises an archive of popular cinema and produces what may be described as ‘activated’ texts.



*The context of the ‘Fifi’ song and its reworking*

Notes:

- 1 Ranjani Mazumdar, ‘Friction, Collision, and the Grotesque: The Dystopic Fragments of Bombay Cinema’, in Gyan Prakash, ed., *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 150-186.
- 2 See: <http://www.india-today.com/itoday/20011022/cinema.shtml>
- 3 Ranjani Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007).
- 4 The film *Badlapur* (dir. Sriram Raghavan, 2015), set in Pune, also narrates a story about a series of unintended murders. The location of a town (and not a metro) becomes an important site in *Being Cyrus* (dir. Homi Adajania, 2006) as well.
- 5 See: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/censor-board-refusal-to-clear-paanch-ignites-debate-over-artistic-freedom/1/231496.html>, accessed 19 August 2016
- 6 Also see Gyan Prakash, *Noir Urbanisms* (2010) for an extensive study of the ‘noir’ and (international) cinema.

- 7 James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film noir in its contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- 8 Lalitha Gopalan, 'Bombay Noir', in Andre Spicer and Helen Hanson, eds., *A Companion to Film Noir* (Walden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 496-511.
- 9 Corey K. Creekmur, 'Cinephilia and Film Noir', in Spicer and Hanson, eds., *A Companion to Film Noir*, pp. 67-76.
- 10 Brian Ott and Cameron Walter, 'Intertextuality: Interpretive practice and textual strategy', in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17.4 (2000), pp. 429-446. Refer for an analysis of intertextuality as a stylistic tool. This essay also discusses 'parodic allusion, creative appropriation, and self-reflexive references' as three distinct intertextual strategies.
- 11 From: [http://archive.tehelka.com/story\\_main20.asp?filename=hub100706Catcher.asp](http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main20.asp?filename=hub100706Catcher.asp)
- 12 Note that this is an allusion to the popular TV series *Kyun Ki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, which is also referred in the opening of *Gangs of Wasseypur*.
- 13 From: <http://dearcinema.com/author/bikas-mishra>, accessed on 16 October 2014
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Cinephilia or the Uses of Disenchantment', in Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, eds., *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), pp. 27-43.
- 16 Madhuja Mukherjee, 'Photoshop Landscapes: Digital Mediations and Bollywood Cities', in *Journal of the Moving Image* 8 (December 2009), pp. 50-72.
- 17 Adrian Athique, 'From cinema hall to multiplex: A public history', in *South Asian Popular Culture*, 9.2 (2011), pp. 147-160.
- 18 Writing about the neo-middle class cinemas and multiplexes it is important to understand that, the multiplex/single theatre distinction may not be as irrefutable as it is made out to be. For instance, many a times A-movies like the *Munnabhai* series, or even a Bollywood blockbuster like *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan, 2007), pick up a B-movie plot, situations, characters, comic situations, gags, dialogue patterns, songs, its colour schemes etc., then rehash it, and re-present it to the international market. Briefly, such transactions

- between A-movies and B-movies, are complicated and fluid, especially when we consider their releases in the single theatres.
- 19 As explained by a production personnel of Yash Raj Films during a personal conversation in 2014.
  - 20 Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Gopal has considered the contemporary middle-class, its consumption cultures, and its crises in relation to specific 'horror' flicks like *Bhoot* (dir. Ram Gopal Varma, (2002).
  - 21 *Karthik Calling Karthik* (dir. Vijay Lalwani, 2010) also tackles obsession with the telephone and aural pleasures.
  - 22 Both *Bombay Velvet* (2015) and *Talaash* (dir. Reema Kagti, 2012) return to the urban part of Mumbai, and present it through a pulp imagination.
  - 23 From: <http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/play/anurag-kashyap-says-he-is-bored-with-his-own-ideas/>
  - 24 See: <http://www.rediff.com/entertai/2001/oct/13paanch.htm>
  - 25 See: <http://www.rediff.com/movies/2007/oct/24anurag.htm>
  - 26 See: <http://dearcinema.com/author/bikas-mishra>, accessed on 16 October 2014
  - 27 See Marcia Landy, ed., *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001)
  - 28 Madhava M. Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). Refer for a study on the ideology of Hindi films and the star persona of Amitabh Bachchan.
  - 29 Both Salman Khan and Sanjay Dutt have faced trial under the Indian Penal Code.
  - 30 Biswarup Sen, 'The Sounds of Modernity: The Evolution of Bollywood Film Song', in S. Gopal and S. Moorti, eds., *Global Bollywood. Travels in Hindi Song and Dance*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 85-104.
  - 31 Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).
  - 32 Madhuja Mukherjee, 'The Architecture of Songs and Music: Soundmarks of Bollywood, a Popular Form and its Emergent Texts', in *Screen Sound Journal* 3 (November 2012), pp. 9-34. Refer for an extended reading on disco and transformation of Hindi film music.
  - 33 Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The 'Bollywoodization' of the Indian cinema:

- cultural nationalism in a global arena', in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4.1 (2003), pp. 25-39.
- 34 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nz9rc50uFpo>
- 35 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DXl8sFB1AM>
- 36 Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"' in Fabio Cleto, ed., *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 53-65.
- 37 See Natalie Sarrazin, 'Global Masala', in Gregory D. Booth and Bradley Shope, eds., *More than Bollywood: Studies in Indian Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) for a detailed study of *Roja* (dir. Mani Ratnam, 1992) and new sonic experiences in the digital context.
- 38 For instance, for the massively popular episodes of the *Sound Trippin* programme, which were aired on MTV during 2012, Khanwalkar travelled across India to assemble sounds of everyday activities, local instruments, and unknown voices and melodies.
- 39 Walter Murch, 'Dense clarity—clear density' in *Ps1.org* 10 (Museum of Modern Art, 2007).
- 40 Jayson Beaster-Jones, *Bollywood Sounds: The Cosmopolitan Mediations of Hindi Film Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 41 'Womania' making video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nq-Hz7eHQLw>, accessed 19 August 2016.
- 42 In the international conference 'The Music Box and its Reverberations: Technology and Music in India', at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, January 2015.
- 43 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abE9JZt0xoU>
- 44 See *Chandni* (Yash Chopra,) 'sagai' (engagement) song in which the 'spoon' is used but the sound is never heard: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hR1z9b1jVRI>
- 45 See <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/Author-Gyan-Prakash-explains-why-Bombay-Velvet-did-not-receive-a-favourable-response/articleshow/47479158.cms>. Also see Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 158-203.