

# IMAGINATIONS

REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ▪ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES



## IMAGINATIONS

JOURNAL OF CROSS\_CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |  
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy  
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imagination.csj.ualberta.ca>

““We are Resilient by Force, not by Choice”:  
Terrifying Bombay in New Bollywood Cinema”

Meheli Sen

August 27, 2013

### To Cite this Article:

Sen, Meheli. ““We are Resilient by Force, not by Choice”:  
Terrifying Bombay in New Bollywood Cinema” *Imaginations* 4:1 (2013): Web (date accessed) 51-67. DOI:  
10.17742/IMAGE.scandal.4-1.7

### To Link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.scandal.4-1.7>



The copyright for each article belongs to the author and has been published in this journal under a **Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial NoDerivatives 3.0** license that allows others to share for non-commercial purposes the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal. The content of this article represents the author's original work and any third-party content, either image or text, has been included under the Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act, or the author has provided the required publication permissions.

# “*We are Resilient by Force, not by Choice*”

## TERRIFYING BOMBAY IN NEW BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

MEHELI SEN

As the home of the Hindi film industry, Bombay has occupied center stage in Bollywood’s imaginary of the modern metropolis. Over the last decade, however, cinematic representations of Bombay have undergone drastic transformations: from being the terrain of gang warfare in the 80s and 90s, the cinematic city has become the primary target and habitat of global terrorism. Bollywood’s rendition of a city perpetually under siege resonates with the series of attacks that have plagued the hapless metropolis since 1993. I interrogate Bollywood’s shifting relationship with its hometown and its audiences via two landmark films—*A Wednesday* and *Aamir* (2008). I am especially interested in the dialectics of ordinariness and extraordinariness that inflect articulations of the city and its citizenry. In both films a ‘common’ individual is called upon to perform uncommon tasks in order to negotiate the space of potential devastation that is now Bombay. Spectacular performances of technologies and stylistic devices generate the cinematic city as an affective locus of dread. I pay special attention to cinematography and editing, which enable the filmic figuration of the city in these recent films.

Bombay, le centre du cinéma Hindi, a toujours servi d’image de la métropole moderne dans l’imaginaire de Bollywood. Néanmoins, au cours de la dernière décennie, la représentation cinématographique de Bombay a subi des transformations drastiques : la ville antérieurement connue pour ses guerres entre bandes dans les années 80 et 90 est maintenant un lieu et une cible important du terrorisme global. Le portrait d’une ville assiégée correspond à une série d’attaques qui ont hanté la métropole malchanceuse depuis 1993. Cet article propose d’analyser le rapport fluctuant entre Bollywood et sa ville originelle à travers deux films marquants « *A Wednesday* » et « *Amir* » (2008). L’accent est mis sur la dialectique ente l’ordinaire et l’extraordinaire qui module les articulations de la ville et des citoyens. Dans les deux films un homme ordinaire est convoqué à exécuter des tâches hors du commun afin de négocier sa position dans l’espace de dévastation potentielle qu’est désormais Bombay. Les performances spectaculaires de la technologie et des appareils stylistiques font de cette ville cinématographique un lieu affectif de la peur. L’article se concentre sur les stratégies cinématographiques et de montage qui dominant la mise en scène de la ville dans ces films.

*The Battle of Bombay is the battle of the self against the crowd. In a city of 14 million people, how much value is associated with the number one? The battle is Man against the Metropolis, which is only the infinite extension of Man and the demon against which he must constantly strive to establish himself or be annihilated. A city is an agglomeration of individual dreams, a mass dream of the crowd. In order for the dream life of a city to stay vital, each individual dream has to stay vital.* (Mehta 539)

*The sense of a city experiencing disorder and crisis dominates narratives of contemporary Bombay in both journalistic discourse and popular perceptions of the city...Crisis is... both an intense experience as well as a metaphor for the contemporary cityscape. For the film industry the experience of crisis can only be rendered to their audiences through narratives of despair.* (Mazumdar 421; emphasis in the original)

For decades, before becoming the cinematic city of death and devastation, Bombay has harnessed myriad fantasies for popular cinema in India. As the commercial capital of India—once as the most important manufacturing hub and lately as a crucial node in the travels of global capital—as well as the home of the film industry, the city has occupied center stage in cinema’s imaginary of the modern metropolis. In fact, Bombay’s *iconic* figuration in Hindi film can hardly be overstated. However, the cinematic city has undergone crucial transformations over the years: in the 50s when the postcolonial national imaginary was animated by aspirations of development and modernity, Bombay became the site for the cinematic elaboration of these dreams; representations of bustling urban spaces belonged to the same iconic register of Nehruvian development, as did bridges, dams and factories. In the 70s, as India entered into a phase of profound political disquiet, the cinematic Bombay morphed into a gangland where smugglers, crime bosses, molls, and the morally ambiguous hero came to be its foremost denizens. In the last two decades following the advent of economic liberalization, Bombay

has transformed once again: for Hindi cinema, it has become either a glitzy playground for the super wealthy, or, an impenetrable and terrifying refuge for underworld criminality or global terrorism. Madhava Prasad has argued for the *metaphorical* nature of Bombay as popular cinema’s *ur* city:

For popular Hindi cinema the metropolis of choice has always been Bombay. From *Miss Frontier Mail* (dir. Homi Wadia, 1936) to *Satya* (dir. Ram Gopal 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.’ 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 (86)

The question of realism is a crucial one for my discussion here, because the films in question not only render the city tangible as an affective terrain of fear, via a careful deployment of cinematic technologies, but also because they

resonate with real-life terror attacks that the metropolis has suffered repeatedly in recent decades.

The recent cycle of terror attacks on the city began in 1993; following the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by a mob amassed by the Hindu Right, the Muslim underworld responded by executing a series of carefully coordinated bomb blasts in the city. 250 civilians were killed and hundreds injured in this first bout of violence that profoundly damaged Bombay's image as India's cosmopolitan capital. Unfortunately, the attacks set a dangerous precedent; since then, cycles of terror attacks have become horrifyingly quotidian in the city: on December 6, 2002, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Babri Mosque incident, a blast on a bus killed two people and injured many others. In March 2003, a bomb exploded in a train compartment killing 10 people; later that year, two bombs exploded in South Bombay, one near the Gateway of India monument and another at Zaveri Bazar. According to published reports, at least 44 people were killed and over a hundred injured in this attack. In 2006, a series of seven bomb blasts killed hundreds of commuters on suburban trains, over a span of just eleven minutes; the reported casualties were over 200. In 2008, yet another series of attacks were carried out in different tourist and commercial locations in the city, this time killing over 150 people, including some international tourists, several attackers and security personnel. For the purposes of my argument, it is

crucial to note the multi-pronged nature of these onslaughts: the terrorists—allegedly belonging to several militant Islamic organizations from India and Pakistan, notably Lashkar-e-Toiba and SIMI—*simultaneously* carried out operations in several far flung regions of the city. A degree of communicational sophistication and intricate planning attended to the execution of this violence.

It is therefore no accident that the cinematic Bombay is now an emblematic habitat of global terrorism. Several recent films, notably *Black Friday* (dir. Anurag Kashyap, 2004), *Aamir* (dir. Raj Kumar Gupta, 2008), *A Wednesday* (dir. Neeraj Pandey, 2008), *Delhi 6* (dir. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, 2009), and others envisage the city as a dreadful site of potential carnage where terror networks remain robust—undetected, unchecked and pervading everyday lives and spaces. These films, mostly thrillers, also underscore the competence—both organizational and informatic—that the attackers have demonstrated in recent years. Needless to say, the fear of technological and organizational sophistication harnessed by alleged terrorists has reached new levels after 9/11.

The twin vectors of space (Bombay city) and time (following the bomb-blasts in 1993) are important for my analysis here, because the filmic city emerges within a special kind of space-time interface. Throughout the rest of this analysis, I hope to demonstrate precisely the manner in which “Bombay” comes

to be figurable, by moving between the spatial and temporal axes of the films in question. The question of realism is especially pertinent to this analysis, because the films I analyze here have been lauded for their “realistic” portrayal of the city and its everyday rhythms. As Moinak Biswas has argued, the city of Hindi cinema has acquired a certain naturalism and density in recent years, especially in the gangster genre, which shares certain key attributes with the films I discuss here: “We are trapped inside the city; the extended initiation in violence makes the character an expert user of the city, whose slums and lanes are choreographed into a performance of shock and survival. What does this mean in terms of film language? Primarily, there is a technical mobilization that seeks to create a rapport between the urban sensorium and the perceptual regime of the film. (In the process, technology itself often rises to the surface as performance).” (online) This, then, is a special kind of realism.<sup>1</sup> Paying particular attention to this “performative” aspect of cinematic technology, in what follows I will investigate exactly what kind of “urban sensorium” is generated in this newer iteration of the thriller—the terrorism film.

### Ordinary Citizens, Extraordinary City

I will discuss two recent and much discussed films from 2008: *Aamir* and *A Wednesday*. Both texts bristle with the dread of attacks on the hapless metropolis, but in markedly different ways: while the eponymous protagonist

of *Aamir* (Rajeev Khandelwal) steps into the fearful city as an unwitting and somewhat naïve outsider, the unnamed hero of *A Wednesday* (Naseeruddin Shah) eloquently invokes the gruesome attacks that have devastated the city in his final, climactic soliloquy to the commissioner of police. Both films bear the dreadful memory of death and destruction at their affective cores; these are, emphatically, trauma texts, which return repeatedly to the moments of violence. What makes these texts especially interesting for the present inquiry is that they exist in a time warp: while neither film’s diegesis takes place at the moment of the blasts,<sup>3</sup> both imagine the metropolis as a space of potential devastation. The bomb blasts figure in these narratives not simply as the past of the city, but as an always already accessible mode of recall and anticipation—a past that is always present, and a present that moves inexorably towards an inevitable future—another attack. What we have here is a traumatic temporality that has lost all logic of linearity; the city of Bombay exists in the films caught in a dreadful cycle of event, delay and repetition.<sup>4</sup>

Brian Massumi’s recent work on “the ontology of the threat” offers a fecund point of entry into the temporal dispensation harnessed by these films:

“Threat is from the future. It is what might come next. Its eventual location and ultimate extent are undefined. Its nature is open-ended. It is not just what it is not: it is not in a way that

is never over. We can never be done with it. Even if a clear and present danger materializes in the present, it is still not over. There is always the nagging potential of the next after being even worse, and of a still worse next again after that. The uncertainty of the potential next is never consumed in any given event. There is always a remainder of uncertainty, an unconsummated surplus of danger.” (53)

What Massumi alerts us to is the threat’s constant deferral—even as an event occurs—as well as its limitless potentiality in the future. It is precisely these characteristics of the threat that enables the protagonist in *A Wednesday* to easily paralyze the law enforcement system of the city, because as the chief minister of the state succinctly states, “there must be no blasts in Bombay today.” The city is a perpetual hostage to threat. The metanarrative of past/future violence enables the cinematic figuration of Bombay as a city under siege—a city that can only be conceived as imperiled. The suspension of linear time endows the cinematic city with a terrifying extraordinariness: Bombay is special because at any moment it may cease to exist altogether. The films situate themselves in a moment of dreadful apprehension until the next attack. Massumi also points out that the existence of a “real” threat is immaterial in this context because, “threat is not real in spite of its nonexistence. It is superlatively real, because of it.” (53) In both films under discussion here, the threat is

“real” insofar as actors and potential actions are concerned; however, what the films more profoundly invoke is the idea that in contemporary Bombay, the threat cannot be anything *but* real. The cinematic city emerges through a particular kind of organization of visual material that privileges fear and dread above all other affective registers—fear is what conjures up the city, brings it into being, as it were: “fear is the *affective fact* of the matter.” (Massumi 54; emphasis in original)

While the metropolis is rendered extraordinary through the logic of temporal re-organization, its citizens remain defiantly ordinary. In fact, both *Aamir* and *A Wednesday* expend significant narrative energy in buttressing the unremarkable lives of its main protagonists. A bewildered Aamir keeps reiterating his status as an ordinary citizen to the disembodied voice on the phone, to no avail. In some ways, however, he is special—and a rare character for Bollywood’s representational matrix—a modern, secular, educated, progressive Muslim. The film chronicles a harrowing day in his life, as the spectral voice on a mobile phone irrevocably changes Aamir’s destiny.

Predictably, the voice belongs to the fanatical leader of a terrorist outfit who deploys the hapless hero to plant a bomb in a crowded residential area in the city. Aamir sheds the ordinariness he has desperately clung to at the very end, when, in an uncharacteristic gesture of defiance, he commits suicide

to save numerous citizens of Bombay. He becomes at this instance the very opposite of a suicide bomber—the destruction of his body remains singular, isolated and in the terrorist’s scheme of things, completely meaningless. It is this final gesture of courageous self-destruction that bestows on him the mantle of heroism, one he has frantically tried to avoid for the bulk of the film. The voice on the phone (the terrorist mastermind remains nameless and largely faceless) coerces, cajoles and, of course, threatens, just so Aamir would understand the profound significance of his name—the word ‘Aamir’ refers to ‘leader’ in Arabic. Ironically, it is by rejecting the mantle of leadership of the Islamic brotherhood that Aamir becomes a hero in death.

The protagonist of *A Wednesday*—nameless, because names carry the marker of religion in South Asia—straddles the ordinary-extraordinary dialectic in a different manner. The post-prologue sequence offers a typical montage of the cityscape: bustling shots of the metropolis, gargantuan traffic jams, hurrying crowds, train stations and trains crammed full of people, citizens scurrying to reach workplaces on time. Amidst this city in motion, we see our protagonist apparently hurrying in tandem. However, the film denotes his extraordinariness by isolating him in vibrant color, while the rest of the city is bleached out, seemingly drained of all hues. Bombay appears largely gray and shrouded in smog in *A Wednesday*, a city that conceals and harbors unseen threats at every moment.

While singled out for our attention, he remains emphatically ordinary in other ways—clearly middle class with no specific facial or bodily characteristic, he easily blends in as one in a crowd of millions. (see fig. 1) His ordinariness, for example, is also signposted through a phone conversation in which his wife reminds him to pick up groceries on his way home; this scene remains a surplus within the film’s stringent narrative economy, but functions as a scaffold to the protagonist’s married, bourgeois and conventional profile. The extraordinary strength and willpower of this man becomes clear only a few minutes later when he brings the entire law and order machinery of the city to a shuddering halt.



Fig. 1

This protagonist—older, unarmed, middle-class and clearly educated—forces the police commissioner as well as the administrative officials of the state to deliver four very specific terrorists—involved in the attacks on the city in 1992-93, 2006, etc.—to a deserted aviation base, and then assassinate

them en masse. His bargaining chip is his assertion of having planted five bombs in five different city locations; he simply threatens to detonate these if the state refuses to accede to his demands. The narrative is, thus, a monumental confrontation between the state—represented here by the beleaguered law enforcement machinery—and the citizen, now in the garb of a vigilante seeker of justice. Initially thought to be the leader of a sophisticated terror network—*Al Qaeda* is mentioned several times—he turns out to be an ordinary citizen of Bombay, but one bent on meting a particular kind of justice on the criminals in question. In accomplishing this astonishing task, he deploys the popular news media as well as an extraordinary range of electronic gadgets that he has amassed on the rooftop of a deserted, half-finished skyscraper, one among many available in the building boom of the city's suburbs. In his final telephone call to the commissioner of police, Rathod (Anupam Kher), he invokes this ordinary-extraordinary dialectic himself: he states that he is a “stupid common man,” the kind who is routinely killed in the terrorist attacks on the city and justice is either delayed or simply not forthcoming. Voicing the collective frustration of millions of citizens of Bombay, he declares, “people are angry, don't try us. We are resilient by force, not choice.” In explaining his actions of the day, he says he is merely “cleaning house” of the pests that infest it—the metaphor of home and pestilence remain compelling indictments of the administration's apparent inability

to either stop the successive waves of attacks on Bombay or to bring the criminals to justice in a timely fashion. At Rathod's persistent questioning, he also reveals that it is ridiculously easy to both gather the raw materials and to make bombs—instructions are easily available on the internet—once again buttressing the failure of the law and order apparatus to eradicate the threat of terror attacks in any meaningful way. The central tool of narrative progression in *A Wednesday* is conversation—a series of them between Rathod and our unnamed protagonist. In the final climactic chat, he informs the astounded commissioner that he interprets the series of terrorist attacks on Bombay as questions, mocking gauntlets that the terrorists have thrown down against the hapless citizenry. These were posed on Tuesday, and he is simply responding to them on a Wednesday.

### Cityscape of Dread as Spectacle

In her essay titled “Spectacle and Death in Bombay Cinema”, Ranjani Mazumdar makes a crucial distinction between two different representational modalities via which the city of Bombay has come to be figurable in recent Hindi cinema: as either spectacular interiors in family films or as dystopic, derelict outdoors in the gritty, realistic gangster genre:

The panoramic interiors of the family films combine design techniques with architectural space to create a “virtual city” where the “global” family can reinvent “Indianness” and modernity.

In this scenario, the space of the Bombay street, the *chawl*, the train, and the crowds, which were always central to the narratives of popular cinema, are consistently marginalized. In contrast, the films of the new gangster genre conduct an elaborate exploration of urban space. The dark alleys, crowded streets, the slums, the peeling walls, and the claustrophobic *chawls* are all on display. Unlike the family films, where public city space is erased, the underworld films negotiate the city through a hyper-real mode that relies on a combination of violence, technology, masculinity, and urban space (402).

Mazumdar, thus, situates Bollywood's "spectacular global city" in opposition to what she calls the city of "spatial disenchantment" (426), as navigated by the urban gangster genre. Pushing her argument further, I would like to ask, what happens when the dark, sinister, dystopic city is *simultaneously* rendered spectacular through film style? Both *Aamir* and *A Wednesday* conjure up the city of Bombay as a terrain of danger, dread and potential destruction. This affective, hyper-metropolis comes to be figurative through the extensive use of cinematic technologies and stylistic tools, particularly via a careful orchestration of *mise-en-scene*, cinematography and editing.

In *A Wednesday*, we are shown three separate, discrete loci of action—the protagonist's perch on the rooftop, the central 'war room' of the police high commission and the disparate spaces

of the city that the policemen traverse in their hunt for the nameless/faceless caller. The three locational clusters do not overlap but are constantly brought together through the logic of temporal simultaneity; the cinematography and editing styles of the film insistently juxtapose these spaces in order to amplify the mounting sense of urgency experienced by the law enforcement authorities. The primary stylistic techniques deployed here are cross-cutting and the use of split screen imagery, both of which enable the spaces to be tied together in an inexorable feedback loop: what happens on the rooftop affects the war room, which affects the battery of policemen combing the city, which is then relayed to the protagonist on the rooftop. Telephone conversations between Rathod and the protagonist are often presented via the split screen—a device that enables us to observe the expressions and reactions of both men simultaneously, and to read the film as a contest of wills between opponents who are equally matched. (see fig. 2). The split screen also generates a hyper-location of the spectator: a terrain of visibility made possible only through the virtuoso use of technology—both cinematic and communicational. As Ravi Vasudevan has suggested, "such a hyper-location, braiding the spectators into spaces that are differentiated, draws upon the omniscient conventions of classical narration. Separated spaces can be figured as adjacent, as collapsing into each other, and as rapidly negotiable, via that key apparatus of contemporary communication, the mobile phone" (66).



Fig. 2

As the clock ticks inexorably toward the deadline set by the protagonist, the operations of the police get even more frenzied. One of the most memorable cross-cut sequences in *A Wednesday* features at least three parallel lines of action: policemen Arif (Jimmy Shergill) and Jay (Aamir Bashir) travel to the aviation base with four terrorists while a sketch artist tries frantically to generate a facial profile of the caller, meanwhile, elevated far above all this action atop the skyscraper, the protagonist calmly surveys the city while drinking a beverage. His stillness and assurance are carefully juxtaposed against the desperate activities he has engendered in the besieged metropolis far below; a series of rapid shots, the pace of editing, and the pulsing music on the soundtrack underscore the urgency of the situation. The city, thus invoked, is a space of pervasive danger, chaos and potential catastrophe.

*Aamir* foregrounds the city of dread through somewhat different means, primarily because in this film the protagonist is immersed in the urban

sensorium in a way that our vigilante from *A Wednesday* was not. As soon as Aamir steps out of the airport, the city confronts him with all its noise, crowds and chaos. Soon after, he realizes that he and his family are in deep peril, ensnared in a web of violence, intrigue and criminal conspiracy that he can barely comprehend, let alone control. Although Aamir claims to be a native of Bombay, the city remains radical in its otherness—Bombay does not welcome him home; it constellates as a deeply threatening *mélange* of dense urban spaces that disturb, disorient and terrorize the hero. Aamir does not simply arrive in Bombay, he *encounters* it. Here again, the question of the *affective* generation of the filmic metropolis is of critical significance, if we understand the term as “persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations. Affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces* of encounter” (Gregg and Seigworth 2-3; emphasis in original) The body’s capacity for action is also of consequence in this regard.

The film employs a virtual cornucopia of techniques to bring into being the city’s dystopic geography and texture. I would like to underscore three particularly effective stylistic choices via which Bombay confronts the hero—and the spectators by proxy—with its dreadful and visceral otherness: the use of selective focus, the foregrounding of crowds of strangers through blocking, and editing. In key sequences as Aamir

tries to comply with the *bhai*'s (literally brother, but used to denote gang leaders in Hindi cinema's vocabulary) orders, we see him ensnared in city spaces that remain defiantly inscrutable. While Aamir himself remains in crisp focus, the foreground and background—essentially the surrounding cityscape—is thrown out of focus. We see blurry outlines of traffic, people etc. whiz by, but not with any degree of clarity. In other words, the city is rendered indistinct as a blur of frantic motion, an affective terrain that can offer no rest, stasis or safe havens for the beleaguered hero.<sup>5</sup> (see fig. 3)



Fig. 3

Also crucial in amplifying Aamir's acute out-of-place-ness are the locations he is asked to traverse during his day-long ordeal. The neighborhoods of Dongri and Bhindi Bazar are hardly spaces regularly explored by Bollywood cinema; these are poor, extremely crowded, largely Muslim suburbs of the city that the film thrusts at us as spectacular counterpoints to the

more familiar Bombay landmarks: the Gateway of India, Marine Drive and Victoria Terminus. Spectators echo Aamir's bewilderment and desperation, as he tries to navigate the treacherous, unfamiliar terrains of the city's underbelly: he is hopelessly lost in the warren of sprawling slums, dirty, narrow lanes and alleys, grimy, derelict exteriors and interiors, and, most importantly, amidst suffocating crowds of jostling strangers. Bombay appears as a labyrinthine maze of dark, dismal, decaying spaces that wait in anticipation to ensnare Aamir within them. These spaces resonate with what Freud called *unheimlich*—the uncanny, diametrically opposed to all that can be considered familiar and the homely.<sup>6</sup>



"Shattered at every step.."

Fig. 4

Aamir sticks out like the proverbial sore thumb in this landscape of urban "ruin" (Mazumdar 424), first because he is dressed in an expensive suit in jarring contrast with the poverty and squalor surrounding him, but more crucially because he is emphatically a stranger in this topos of the city as a space of danger and disenchantment. The editing of *Aamir* compellingly underscores

his status as an outsider. In multiple sequences—for example, especially provocatively in the scene where he walks through the meat market<sup>7</sup>—wide shots of the hero trapped amidst crowds hurrying through the city are rapidly juxtaposed against big close ups of faces, presumably observing his every move from the vicinity. We are never given a spatial context for these faces, most of which look watchful, sinister, sentient; we never know how close or far away these disembodied people are from Aamir, amplifying our sense of disorientation and dislocation. (see figs. 4, 5 and 6). The point-of-view mobile shots ensure that when these faces look at him, they also look at us.<sup>8</sup> Some sequences juxtapose slow motion shots of crowds, faces and feet; masses of unfamiliar bodies push, shove and jostle Aamir as he desperately hurries to do the *bhai's* bidding. The sporadic use of a hand-held camera also underscores our sense of participation in this sequence. In a radical revision of Bollywood's typical representations of good-hearted, plebian city-folk, the pressing multitude never offers comfort or succor to the hero; the crowds remain inscrutable, apparently either hostile or simply indifferent, and, oppressively close, heightening Aamir's acute sense of being claustrophobically hemmed in. And, the sense of ever-present threat is always overwhelming amidst crowds, especially because the press of unruly, chaotic bodies also includes the *bhai's* minions and agents, ensuring his constant omniscience.



Fig. 5, Fig. 6

### Panopticon, Synopticon and the City of Surveillance

The dreadful city in both *A Wednesday* and *Aamir* is also, foundationally, a city of surveillance. Each film envisages Bombay via distinct and varied regimes of visibility: in the former, the protagonist surveys the city, unseen, from his rooftop perch, in the latter Aamir is always under scrutiny by visible and invisible eyes. Both texts also foreground modern communication devices, most ubiquitously the mobile phone which connects disparate spaces

and actors in the drama of suspense and violence.

Following Michel Foucault's (1977) seminal elaboration of Jeremy Bentham's 1785 disciplinary model of the Panopticon, the trope has come to be pervasive in the field of surveillance studies. In spite of its limited purchase in engaging with the mind-boggling array of data gathering technologies used currently by statist authorities and corporations, the panoptical model is in fact quite resonant with the manner in which *A Wednesday* maps the city of Bombay as a series of visible and invisible zones of access and control.<sup>9</sup> First, the film simultaneously fetishizes latest technological devices and renders them everyday. The "stupid common man" has amassed a vast array of computerized and network devices on the rooftop and, as mentioned above, he calmly informs Rathod that in the era of the internet, it is ridiculously simple to access technologies of violence. (see fig. 7) Once again, we are confronted by the dialectics of ordinariness/extraordinariness of the vigilante citizen, and, the same dialectic informs the film's representation of informational technology and its relationship to potential violence. If a "common man" can create and detonate a dozen bombs across Bombay, then the law enforcement apparatus is rendered completely impotent in the current era of pervasive electronic competence. The age of information is both abilifying and debilitating; informational regimes can just as easily be deployed to plan and execute violence as to prevent

it. In Bombay—the city besieged by terror—the former has historically triumphed over the latter. *A Wednesday* also underscores this discrepancy in terms technological/informational competence between the state and the vigilante/terrorist.



Fig. 7, Fig. 8, Fig. 9

Vision—seeing/observing/surveillance as a metaphor for power—is also granted to the protagonist via the camerawork of the film. In several key sequences, the

protagonist is framed against Bombay's cityscape, and a number of 360 degree tracking, panning and crane shots, present the city as his domain (see figs. 8 and 9). This is a vista of urban geography that he controls through the power of vision: "The panoptic urge is to make everything visible; it is the desire and drive towards a total gaze, to fix the body through technique and to generate regimes of self discipline through uncertainty" (Lyon 44). The absolute gaze of the protagonist is ironically reinforced by the fact that he is both intimately linked to these spaces, and, *simultaneously* loftily removed from them. Rahul Mukherjee provides an excellent description of these sequences of surveillance, visibility and control in *A Wednesday*:

If terror indeed thrives on information, of which it must deprive the victim, the deceptive "stupid common man" garners news through Naina Roy's news channel and dodges the police's attempts to track down his location by switching SIM cards and using re-routed mobile phones. He sees the city through television, he does not seek his enemies on the streets of the city. His ensuing telephonic duel with the commissioner begins to resemble Paul Virilio's conceptualization of international warfare as an "optical confrontation" which involves "seeing," "forseeing" and "not being able to see", and "where winning is trying to keep the enemy in constant sight" (244).

The state's relative incompetence in terms of informational technologies—although we also witness urgent counter-surveillance attempts in the war room and the use of a hacker—is also conveyed through the vigilante's splendid, singular stillness, starkly in contrast with a "series of fast paced, sharply edited shots of the commissioner pacing the police station, directing his officers over the phone as they frantically try to detect bombs in crowded malls and train stations" (Mukherjee 244). As mentioned above, the technique of cross-cutting enables the audience not only to witness parallel lines of action occurring simultaneously, but also to appreciate the vastly different affective domains occupied by the state and the protagonist.

*Aamir* imagines the dreadful metropolis through an economy of visibility that can be understood in exact opposition of the panoptical model of *A Wednesday*. Here, the many seen and unseen eyes surveil the one beleaguered hero Aamir—a reverse configuration that Thomas Mathiesen has famously called the Synopticon (1997). *Aamir* charts the spaces of Bombay not only through cartographies of surveillance but also renders it completely paranoid. Notably, for Freud (2003), paranoia is a pathological state intimately connected to the fear of being looked at. Aamir's terror escalates not only as he understands the nature of the scrutiny he is under—an entire city is operating as a well-coordinated machine, the omniscient eyes and ears of the Big Brother—but also because

his life has been reduced to a data mine already available to the terror network. The *bhai* calmly recounts every detail of Aamir's existence to him, reinforcing the power of surveillance and data gathering as a process that has begun *even before* the film commences. Because it uses surveillance as narrative content, *Aamir* can be understood as a film *about* regimes of visibility. Dozens of high-angle shots in which we see Aamir meandering through crowded lanes and *mohallas* (neighborhoods) render him dwarfed and vulnerable, but strictly visible at all times; these bird's-eye shots are not necessarily attributed to specific observers, they remain free floating point-of-view shots without a specific viewing subject—a technique that reinforces the impression of the entire city as a terrifying scopic regime. Potentially every shot of Aamir negotiating the city-maze could be a carefully truncated point-of-view shot, a technique that makes every scene watchful, sentient. Occasionally, we share Aamir's fearful gaze as he looks around him, watches faces that press in on all sides, and, people standing in balconies and windows of the derelict buildings that tower over him (see fig. 10). The editing underscores this paranoid relationship to the city as quick cuts give us brief, disembodied glimpses of faces that may or may not belong to the *bhai*'s many 'informers.' The ever-present mobile phone—in the film's visual universe almost everyone constantly speaks into these—also creates a domain of surveillance and the constant transmission of information; whatever Aamir does, whether he

complies or disobeys the spectral commands, is instantly conveyed to the *bhai* (see fig. 11). The city and the citizens—all of whom in this paranoid framework *become* by default the *bhai*'s minions—function as a networked totality: a web of information that surrounds Aamir and holds him enmeshed in its invisible embrace. The *bhai*, thus, rules over the city through his control of visual/aural terrains; his absolute authority is ensured by absolute scrutiny.



Fig. 10, Fig. 11

Hindi popular cinema's romance with the city of Bombay has undergone several distinct iterations; through all the phases however, the city has always offered spaces of redemption and rehabilitation—spaces of respite, sanctuary and solace for filmic protagonists. After a series of terror attacks in recent decades and following

massive transformations in the socio-economic and political spheres in India, the city is no longer figurable *only* as a liberating space of modernity and globality. Recent Bollywood cinema now interrogates its relationship with India's most iconic metropolis through narratives of death, destruction and actual or potential catastrophe. Films such as *Aamir* and *A Wednesday*, among many others, provide us with a privileged point of entry into the cinematic metropolis as constitutively and foundationally transformed by a new era of globalization and terrorism. Bombay—once the beloved metropolis of Bombay cinema, the site where the dreams of the nation were most compellingly articulated, where dreams could sometimes be realized—has come to stand in for failure of the modern state in India. Bombay has become a dreadful, dystopic, cinematic nightmare—a metropolitan ruin.

### Works Cited

- Biswas, Moinak. "Shaharer Chitralipi." In *Baromas* (32) Saradiya. Kolkata: Baromas, 2012. 219-228. Print.
- . "Mourning and Blood Ties: Macbeth in Mumbai." In *Journal of Moving Image*. (5) 2006. Web. <doi: [http://www.jmionline.org/film\\_journal/jmi\\_05/article\\_04.php](http://www.jmionline.org/film_journal/jmi_05/article_04.php)>.
- Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." In *October* (59) Winter 1992. 3-7. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1977. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003. Print.
- Lyons, David. "9/11, Synopticon and Scopophilia: Watching and Being Watched." In Haggerty and Ericson, eds. *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. 35-54. Print.
- Massumi, Brian. "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat." In Gregg and Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 52-70. Print.
- Mathiesen, Thomas. "The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited." In *Theoretical Criminology* 1 (2) (1997). 215-34. Print.
- Mazumdar, Rnajani. "Spectacle and Death in the City of Bombay Cinema." Prakash and Kruse (Eds.), *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics, and Everyday Life* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. 401-432. Print.
- Mehta, S. *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.
- Mukherjee, Rahul. "A Reply To Terrorism on a Wednesday: A Citizen Vigilante's Prescriptions for Governing Terrorism." In *Sarai Reader 08: Fear*. Delhi: CSDS, 2005. 242-247 Print..
- Prasad, M. "Realism and Fantasy in Representations of Metropolitan Life in Indian Cinema." Kaarsholm, ed. *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience*. (pp. 83-99). Kolkata: Seagull Books. Print.
- Seigworth, Gregory and Gregg, Melissa. "An Inventory of Shimmers." Gregg and Seigworth, (.) eds. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. 1-25. Print.
- Tanvir, Kuhu. "Myth, Legend, Conspiracy: Urban Terror in *Aamir* and *Delhi 6*." In *Sarai Reader 08: Fear*. Delhi: CSDS, 2008. 248-253. Print.

Vasudevan, Ravi. "The Exhilaration of Dread: Genre, Narrative Form and Film Style in Contemporary Urban Action Films." In *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life*. (Delhi: CSDS, 2002. 58-67. Print.

### (Endnotes)

1 In Biswas's reading, this new kind of "naturalism is fundamentally different from, say, a neorealist film where vision could flow from the sparse everyday objects to the natural horizon with relative ease. A surfeit of objects is offered to the eye. The underworld, seen in this perspective, is a seemingly endless study of faces, gestures, speech and action, built upon the modes of humdrum urban street life and subaltern living made familiar primarily through television." (online)

2 Rahul Mukherjee has noted that ironically, bomb blasts accompanied the release of *A Wednesday* in several cities across India (243).

3 While this history of violence informs the films' temporal imagination of Bombay, the plots adhere to strict deadlines; both films feature multiple lines of action which move in a linear fashion toward the climax. The plots remain faithful to the clock, the rendition of the city as an affective domain does not. In other words, here I am making a crucial distinction between plot-time—which operate under unyielding deadlines in each case—and the temporal figuration of the city of Bombay.

4 What we have here is an excellent example of what has been called "haptic visuality" in recent media theories—a way of viewing that engages multiple senses. *Aamir's* images constantly challenge the spectator to mobilize our senses—to see, touch and smell the nightmarish world that Aamir finds himself trapped within.

5 Kuhu Tanvir also comments on the film's lack of domestic spaces and homeliness: "Aamir is the only upper-class moderate Muslim the film has, and it is therefore worth noting that his private space is not shown almost at all, except for one short, imagined scene when he recalls calling home and speaking to his family. When compared to the way in which other, public, apparently non-secular spaces are mapped in the film, this scene, which is barely a few seconds long, can be easily forgotten (249).

6 Aamir's return with the red suitcase through the slaughterhouse is also shot with the foreboding song, "Haara Haara" pulsing on the soundtrack, enforcing Aamir's acute sense of entrapment.

7 Moinak Biswas, for example, has argued in a recent essay that *Aamir's* invocation of the uncanny hinges on the manner in which the screen "looks back" at us. When the seen—in this case the dense, diegetic world of the film—returns our gaze, a deep sense of discomfiture is generated. (226)

8 Gilles Deleuze's conceptualization of "societies of control" offers another valuable framework for understanding the imprecise, flexible and occluded nature of power in films like *Aamir* and *A Wednesday*. According to Deleuze, we have now moved from what Foucault's calls disciplinary societies—where laws are represented by the enclosed and confined spaces of the prison, factory, hospital, etc.—to a more open, dispersed and free floating form of control in late capitalism, that is no less unforgiving. Under the aegis of the global market control is "continuous and without limit" while the individual is merely a "*dividual*"—"undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network" (6). Two aspects of Deleuze's argument are especially pertinent to the present discussion—the *simultaneous* ubiquity and dispersive nature of power, and, the impossibility of dodging its constantly mutating operations. The *pervasive* nature of control is tellingly apparent in, for example, Aamir's futile attempt to slip past the network of mobile phones that constitutes the informatic straightjacket of the city. It is of little consequence in this respect if the state surveils the individual or non-state actors. In the current media ecology, the individual is always strictly within network.

Meheli Sen is Assistant Professor in the Department of African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian Languages and Literatures (AMESALL) and the Cinema Studies program at Rutgers University. Her primary research area is post-independence popular Hindi cinema, commonly referred to as 'Bollywood'. She is especially interested in how the filmic registers of genre, gender and sexuality negotiate specific moments in India's troubled encounters with modernity and more recently, globalization. Sen's work has been published in journals such as *The Journal of the Moving Image* and *South Asian Review*, as well as in the edited anthology *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*. She is co-editing an anthology titled *Figurations in Indian Film*, forthcoming from Palgrave-Macmillan. Her current research engages 'B' genres, particularly horror, in the larger rubric of the Bollywood system.

Meheli Sen est professeure adjointe dans le département des langues et littératures de l'Afrique, du Moyen-Orient et de l'Asie du Sud (AMESALL), ainsi que dans le département d'études cinématographique à l'Université Rutgers. Son domaine de recherche principal est le cinéma populaire hindi de l'après-Indépendance, qu'on appelle habituellement « Bollywood ». Elle s'intéresse à la manière dont la représentation du genre, du sexe et de la sexualité dans le cinéma permet de négocier des moments particuliers du rencontre difficile de l'Inde avec la modernité et la globalisation. Sen a publié dans « *The Journal of the Moving Image* » et « *South Asian review* ». Elle a également édité l'anthologie *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation and Diaspora*. Elle collabore actuellement à la révision d'une anthologie intitulée *Figurations in Indian Film*, à paraître chez Palgrave-Macmillan, et elle mène des recherches sur les genres « B », surtout l'horreur, dans le système Bollywood.

Copyright Meheli Sen. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons 3.0 License although certain works referenced herein may be separately licensed, or the author has exercised their right to fair dealing under the Canadian *Copyright Act*.

