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Provincialising Bollywood? Cultural economy of north-Indian small-town nostalgia in the Indian multiplex

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This paper looks at the journey of new small-town films and analyses the cultural economy of this small-town nostalgia. Looking at the reconfiguration of Indian cities as a key phase, the paper attempts to argue that small-town nostalgia is produced by these reconfigurations as the small-town seeps into the big cities and produces its cinematic variant from within the urban imaginary. The paper conceptualises the small-town as a space marked by performative excess and state of exception in the realm of law and order. It is produced as an imaginary 'other' of the big city, a counter-utopia which threatens even as it entertains the residual cultural-self trapped in the confident but ill-conceived Indian urbanism. The multiplex, as a prominent socio-economic site of exhibition, now hosts this new small-town simulacra that disengages itself gradually from its referent and gets a life of its own. This paper, therefore, situates small-town nostalgia within the multiplex-mall probing the boundary conditions of this new genre now working in solidarity with various vernacular cinemas in its site-specific idioms, yet thriving in a space beyond. Thus, the paper raises arguments about a new cinema culture that has at its heart, complex migration patterns across India, a performative belonging, and a cinema culture of mourning.

When films like DDLJ made it big, filmmakers started catering to the huge NRI market. At that time, the Box Office revenues from Bihar and UP were not impressive enough, and so, 'Shawa-Shawa' *chalta raha* ['Shawa-Shawa' went on]. That was the time when regional cinema began to emerge in a big way – Bhojpuri, Marathi, Bengali – to cater to the demands of the regional audience. But the middle class settled in small towns now, people like you and me who go to multiplexes, don't relate to Bhojpuri cinema or the 'I Hate Luv Storys' brand of films. That's how stories like *Ishqiya* and *Tanu Weds Manu*, which are based in UP, began to find an audience. (Tigmashu Dhulia, as quoted in Seth 2011)

This paper attempts to theoretically situate the new wave of Hindi films either set within a north-Indian small-town or that invoke an idea of it. On the one hand, it tries to understand why small-town nostalgia has become significant at precisely this moment, and on the other, it traces and analyses the moves of this new cultural economy. The cinematic small-town has already crossed over from real constraints and definitions into a *small-town simulacra*. The small-town may have gradually become more *form* than *content*, it might have also become the anchor of a cinema located *elsewhere* – which would mean a body of films that shun the label 'Bombay Cinema'. Still, it is not yet an empty signifier for it has an attributional core, a spatio-cultural axis around which the linguistic dispersions of the term organise themselves. It must be admitted, though, that as Indian cities change radically, it becomes increasingly difficult to hold together the definitive small-town. While the paper studies this blurred map and its possible history, resonances and legacy, I shall argue that

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this nostalgia acquires its commercial appeal primarily through north-Indians' migration to tier-1 cities congregating within the catchment areas of multiplexes.¹

The rise of the new migrant middle-class in Indian metropolises can also be seen as a cultural uprooting of the small-town middle-class. As they left their towns across north-India to find employment in the booming Information Technology (IT) industry, and various other service industries fuelling the Indian economy, the small-town imaginary got temporarily lost in their struggles with the metropolis. Between the expectation of English-speaking corporate citizenship and small-town vernacular subject-hood, instead of a reconciliation there gradually emerged a tacit agreement of spatial segregation. As a result, the small-town imaginary, architecturally situated at the affluent peripheries of these cities, was to be aggregated by an indifferent performativity at odds with the metropolis.

At the turn of the century, the pressure gradually built up on cities such as Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, Mysore, Bhubaneswar, amongst others, and enforced upon them an infrastructural turn-around. For the turn-around to happen though, the cities had to go through massive spatial adjustment which could accommodate a different order within. From discovering a logic of reorganization to up-scaling the infrastructure, it took nearly half a decade. By 2007–2008, offices as well as residential spaces had organised themselves on or around the periphery of the city, further weakening the links between the two. These were also the years when tier-2 and tier-3 cities had to discover their own logic of re-organisation. Crucially, in 2005, a new spatial regime was launched through Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), the single-largest initiative for planned development of 65 cities – encompassing a wide variety of cities from metropolises to tier-3 towns. Sivaramakrishnan's (2011) *Re-Visioning Indian Cities* investigates the project in great detail, critiquing the *mission mode* focusing on large projects within urban confines to make them investor-friendly. This on-going project threatens to delimit the cultural small-town within the upcoming world-class cities, as the world-class becomes the aesthetic and infrastructural benchmark, a foreclosure of identity that reorients the towns in relation to the desired standard. The picture becomes even more complex when seen in conjunction with the efforts of global capital to bring more people and more cities within its orbit, so as to append more nodes to the network, and circulate through them technological waves which would convert them into small, production-consumption units, thus stakeholders in what is often called the investor-friendly climate.

These developmental resonances across the country have eroded the cultural imagination of the small-town, particularly its north-Indian variant. The co-existence of two indifferent orders has been an on-going process. If there has been a growing resentment against the migrant middle-classes who flaunt their affluence, exercise their purchasing power, and overwhelm the economic activity of the cities they inhabit, it has been increasingly countered by a spatial segregation of the conservative natives and the upwardly mobile migrant communities. Therefore, instead of hosting a meaningful dialogue and cultural equilibrium across communities, these cities have settled into an *architectural indifference* towards the Hindi-speaking northerner. In a city like Bangalore, it can be seen in the congregation of migrant communities around the ring-road that circumscribes the city for faster traffic movement, while localities such as *Jayanagar* and *Malleswaram* – the same as the *City Area* in Pune – continue to inhabit a cultural past in some tension with the changing metropolis. This can indeed be understood in the sense of two conflicting notions of time – one trying to hold the self in a time slipping away, the other trying to put a turbo-engine onto the move towards a *world-class* future, even though it may undercut the vernacular self. I refer to the above as *time warfare*. It must be clarified, however, that I do not wish to suggest a contestation between tendencies that could be marked as regressive

and progressive. That they look towards two different conceptions of time as central to their self-definition does not render legitimacy or desirability to the move towards any temporal orientation. The *time warfare*, then, is a battle within, a warfare that forces the self to privilege one orientation over another; therefore, even to disaggregate the self and its continuity to privilege one fragment of the self over another.

I argue that small-town nostalgia is produced by this *time warfare* even as it is sustained by the *architectural indifference* of the cities where multiplexes began to thrive. Let me elaborate upon this. Space and time come together to give a semblance of stability to human experience, as well as the memory or imagination of an experience. The friction induced by *architectural indifference* causes a centrifugal imbalance that can only be compensated for by falling back on a surplus time, a time that is retained in excess of an experiential totality. A crucial illustration of this would be the recent rise of right-wing politics - in Bangalore for example - simultaneous to the rapid globalisation of the city. Instead of cohabiting with the regional, the global has added tremendously to the insecurities of regional sentiments and catalysed militant regionalisation (see Srinivasaraju 2012 for the manifestation of the same in Kannada news media). This surplus time, then, is a nostalgic temporality as recalled from the archive of the communal self. The *time warfare* also plays a vital role by widening the gap between felt time and the time that represents the self in warfare – the time composed of a progression of events. Let me assert that the nostalgia is produced on both sides even though its nature is certainly not the same. Those of the futuristic periphery, struggling with the confounding ideas of labour, style, affluence, and dignity, may invoke an arena where they had fewer options and a much lesser burden of making the right choice. At the same time, for those surrounded on all sides by a ring-road of *world-class* inhabitants, there is a larger premium on the retention of values, on holding on to the core as the periphery allows itself to be compromised. In other words, time travels inwards into those resisting the world-class aesthetic as it tries to integrate itself with the notion of an uncompromising cultural core.

Conceptualising the cinematic small-town

What kind of space is this small-town, after all? And how closely do the films map it onto real towns? The cinematic small-town is often an assemblage, some components of which can be mapped onto real towns while the rest of which cannot. Early small-town films such as *Haasil* (2003, dir. Tigmanshu Dhulia) and *Main Meri Patni aur Woh* (2004, dir. Chandan Arora) are distinctly located in a small-town while later ones such as *Ishaqzaade* (2012, dir. Habib Faisal) refer to a fictional town in the narrative even as the images are anchored by the iconic features of a real small-town. As we progress into 2009–2010, which is when the form finds an industrial thrust, there remains a wide gap between the ontological and the representational. Primarily due to the spatial dislocation between the material and its site of consumption, this gap lends itself to be utilised as a *creative armature* towards the representational, instead of acting as a dampener. In other words, the small-town films subvert the referent because they escape a regimental mapping onto symbolic arena, largely due to the fact that the already uprooted multiplex audience is rather desperate to hold onto the cultural fragments offered.

These films, therefore, maintain a relative disinterest in the territory beyond its use-value. The cinematic small-towns are often constituted through a range of material signifiers – the infrastructure, the people, the language, etc. More importantly, though, they form the vocabulary for a *state of exception* within the city-centric imaginary; they represent the shadow-regions of the urban order, a region not yet sorted out – visually

chaotic and performatively excessive. This exception lends itself perfectly to rhetorical flourishes of all human capacities, the linguistic being the foremost of them, so they can be maximized in an uninhibited manner. Situating a small-town as a state of exception also means imagining it as a fragment detached from its relationalities to adjacent fragments; it becomes a disaggregated chunk which would produce its identity in its performance. That is why the small-town re-presents the hidden archive of a *performative belonging*, a curious blend of arrogance and excess that uses the distance between the space and the place to further rhetoricise it.

The small-town engenders curiosity as it opens up an underexplored potentiality – a way of life somewhere in the middle of the metropolis and the village – that cannot occupy either of the idealised extremes. The most peculiar aspect of the cinematic return of this small-town, therefore, is its mobility across these imaginary extremes. That is precisely why it cannot be situated in any of the tier 2/3 cities. In order for it to remain viable for large-scale consumption, its lack of specificity – even in spite of a specific town referred within the narrative – remains its selling point. Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of Wasseypur I & II* (2012), for example, regardless of the truth-claims, situates the mannerisms, spoken language, music, and styling broadly over the entire state of Bihar. The narrative also deploys the framework of two gangs engaged in extreme violence instead of addressing the complex politics of Dhanbad's violent history.² On the contrary, *Shanghai* (2012, dir. Dibakar Banerjee) uses a broad template of the fictional small-town to politicise the real.

The slippery self-identification of the small-town, then, rides the waves of *time warfare* and *architectural indifference*, as laid out by the metropolis, and as a manifestation of the hidden archive of the performative spirit throttled by the rapid urbanization of Bombay cinema. While this cinematic return may be read in many ways, this paper attempts to read it as: one, an economic strategy to address the residual affection for the cultural belonging of the migrant middle-classes in the metros; two, as a response to the creative ceiling hit by Hindi cinema that could be broken only by tapping into the alternative creative temper of filmmakers hailing from smaller towns and willing to take a plunge into their own archived selves, indeed aided by the experimental temper the multiplex has supported with its smaller theatres and de-risked business.

The multiplex problem

The multiplex-mall is a key player that started its surge in India in the early 2000s. It overwrites the existing codes of public behaviour by asserting a reconfigured notion of *decency* as it traps more and more subjects within a multimedia matrix and establishes new standards of contact, loudness, body movements, and style (Athique and Hill 2010). This performative reconfiguration disaggregates the existing regime of homosociality and consolidates new ones around the notion of the *world-class*. It is because of this reorientation of the self – indeed also a contestation between the visual and performative selves – that the performative surplus of the small-town is repressed through an aesthetic surveillance. This surplus is, I argue, the addressee of the return to small-town nostalgia. The entire range of films, out of which I discuss a few selected ones in detail, address the otherwise confined performativity residing within world-class subjects, a tendency under reformulation but not yet reconciled. It must be noted therefore, that these films with a short run often in the multiplexes alone, are not directly speaking to the subjects who reside in the small-towns that they paint on the screen. The cinematic small-town is very much a transaction within the subterranean order.

It is somewhat simplistic, therefore, to see this return, as Dhulia suggests, as determined by the socio-cultural matrix that the new filmmakers belong to. The cinematic small-town, much like the cinematic city, remains a complex construction. Going back to the village today means going back to issue-based cinema as attempted by *Swades* (2004, dir. Ashutosh Gowariker) and *Peepli Live* (2010, dir. Anusha Rizvi and Mahmood Farooqui). The small-town – unlike the idealized residues of the cinematic village that was considered to be the moral axis of Indic civilization till the late 1970s – retains immense potential for an eclectic, quick-witted cinema that could appeal to a range of audiences. Navdeep Singh sums it up rather succinctly, ‘Small-towns just have more colour. Most big cities look like each other’ (as quoted in Susan 2008). However, it is the absence of spatial, geographical, regional specificity in Bollywood that annoys him tremendously:

Movies are either in New York or in Never-Never land. You look at characters in a movie and you don’t know who they are, where they are, where they are from . . . Say you are watching a Tamil film. It has a well-defined catchment area. So the location of the characters, caste, class, everything is very clear. The problem for Bollywood is this. Who is its natural audience? Who speaks Hindi? Nobody does. When I had two minutes of Hindi as its spoken anywhere in Rajasthan in Manorama, people complained that it’s a dialect and that they couldn’t understand it. So we have movies about nowhere for people from nowhere. (as quoted in Susan 2008)

Singh’s annoyance is certainly not out of place in the history of Bollywood.³ The space has traditionally been subjected to a gendered vocabulary within the visual language of cinema. In the 1960s, cinema took a fascination with Kashmir and in the 1990s, European locales, mostly Switzerland, formed the planar background of Bollywood. It was rarely inhabited, and often the hills and snow, the waterfalls and rivers, were only used as a backdrop for songs and other action. On the other hand, the city films were, until very recently, films consistently set in Bombay.

The affective co-ordinates of the cinematic small-town represent a *state of exception*. They speak the language of fear. The collapse of legality, a threat of unprotectedness, discomfort, chaos, and infrastructural inadequacy are integral to this small-town as *Shool* (1999, dir. E. Nivas) and *Haasil* (2003, dir. Tigmanshu Dhulia) represent them, for example. The exception gets realised by presenting itself as the constitutive outside of multiplex-mall order. Alongside the nostalgia for *repressed performativity*, the small-town films also warn us against the absence of lawfulness, which orders our urbanity. These films, therefore, also allow the urban middle-classes to be wary of romanticizing the small-towns. The cinematic small-town is to be understood through circumspection; it is to be reminisced for its complex but incomplete liaison with modernity, still not outside the clutches of a feudal, traditional past. Its antecedents need analysis while we study the gap between real and imagined small-towns, for cinema often concerns itself with the latter in the name of former. Pulled apart by conflicting imaginations, the *state of exception* provides a rationale to the urban present but pushes the urban imaginary into an unstable temporality.

Let us begin with briefly looking at three films released in the last decade to understand how this shift is working, before we move on to more recent films to map out the many moves of small-town simulacra in contemporary Bollywood.

***Haasil* (2003, dir. Tigmanshu Dhulia)**

Haasil is one of the most important small-town films primarily because, even as it pioneered the current phase, it did so much before others would pick up the same note. The film remains sensitive towards Allahabad, the town where it locates itself, and bravely locates the student politics of Allahabad University within the society – addressing even

the caste equation. Yet, the latent euphoria it managed to invoke ties up with the terms of reception later small-town films would thrive on. Before we discuss this gap between production and reception and how *Haasil* helped come into being a small-town simulacra which would benefit from a featherweight territoriality, let us begin by assessing the manner in which the film earned its popularity in spite of its box-office performance.

Haasil circulated widely throughout the latter half of the last decade, even though it was not much of a success when it was released. Yet, it slowly acquired a cult following through torrent downloads and fan clubs.⁴ Several blog entries acknowledge *Haasil* as a cult movie, mostly through repeated viewings in college campuses.⁵ Some have compared the genius of its dialogues with *Sholay* (1975, dir. Ramesh Sippy), the biggest cult classic in the history of Bombay cinema (<http://septemberthe22nd.blogspot.com/2008/05/haasil-movie.html>), and others list it as ‘must see before you die’ (<http://www.bobbysing.com/recentpost.php?postid=postid042609132326>).⁷ Often, it is discussed how many times people have seen the film and lofty claims are made. ‘Haasil Revisited’, a Facebook community, has one such discussion that suggests the cult status of the film (<http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=87849824178&topic=9322>).

Apparently a film about campus politics among students of Allahabad University, *Haasil* brings the north-Indian small-town alive in an unprecedented manner. It presents a sincere observation of the cultural registers of the small-town – language, temperaments, and mannerisms of the region – aggregated to heighten the performative excess. Its textural richness ensures an intimacy between the audience and the cinematic space. What lies underneath the intimacy is indeed the notion of ‘our cinema’, a re-turn to the repressed spatial imaginary. Dhulia, however, asserts its political text:

When I see students not bothered about society, it hurts me. Everybody has become complacent. The youth of India are not growing. They have not studied enough, there is no interest in trying to know what our history is, what politics is all about. They reject politics, saying it is ‘dirty’. But politics runs you and your country. If it is dirty, we have to do something about it. (as quoted in Anjum N 2003)

The degeneration of Allahabad prompted him to write *Haasil*. He had to make a ‘film on how religious and caste-based parties have entered universities and are killing the city ... At one time, it was India’s cultural capital. All big Hindi poets and writers came from there’ (as quoted in Seth 2011). The campus politics of north-Indian universities being dominated by violence and big money, Dhulia wanted to address the prototype of vulgar mainstream politics.

However, Dhulia’s reasons did not make the film popular, let alone successful. Using the transformation from an issue-based to a cult film, we could expose the gaps between narration and reception. None of the popular forums discuss the film’s politics, while the performative elements that lend themselves to impersonation and mimicry actually add tremendously to its afterlife. The space in *Haasil* is marked distinctly by its cultural determinants – visual as well as performative. It is hard to ignore in the opening sequence that runs through the University campus, the *paan*-spit marks all over, the dilapidated colonial construction the maintenance of which has been entirely overlooked, the torn posters of students’ political campaigns, random charcoal scribbling on the walls. The stories of daredevil young lumpens like Ranavijay who take on an entire gang with bare-handed courage, and wear their confidence on their sleeve, are the daily staple of Hindi newspapers of eastern UP. The cycle-rickshaws, the college-going young men riding bicycles through dark and empty residential areas, coarse caste-based political leadership, shows of political strength waving out to chanting thousands from open-jeeps, illogical word-play like *vayu-yuva* to score rhetorical points with sloganeering crowds, students

requesting student-leaders for illicit favours with the system, and a distinctly rhetoric-rich language both to replace or accentuate aggression, are embedded in the very nature of small-town politics of the region.

Simultaneously, *Haasil*'s Allahabad is peculiarly marked by endless cycles of violence, an impossibility to realize one's delicate emotions, or escape the dangers of being violated. To an extent, *Shool* was a precursor to *Haasil*, depicting the naked threat surrounding the law-enforcer whose helplessness is analogous to that of the innocent protagonist in *Haasil*. Yet, it is worth probing why *Haasil* gained an afterlife that *Shool* could not, even though it paints a powerful, 'realistic' portrait of the small-town. I would argue that this is largely due to *Haasil*'s performative playfulness and narrative openness, which is negated by the vigilante tension of *Shool*. For a film to become the cultural document of dislocated subjecthood, speech and performance offer invigoration unavailable through visual indexicality. A cultural document, after all, thrives on the culturally embedded methods of retention of the cultural object. In Indian film-going practice, the linguistic has traditionally held sway over the visual. People recite film dialogues to each other and in the process, retain what they impersonate. The power of this re-enactment must not be dismissed as it asserts the dominance of the performative in a culture that privileges repetition, presence, and orality over logical and imaginative novelty. That is how, at best, one can understand why an utterance as ordinary from the outside as '*Tum aye kahan se be?*' (How on earth did you arrive here?) becomes immensely popular within the community for its intonation, for its stylistics.⁶ What *Haasil* enabled is a re-living of the small-town experience amidst small north-Indian collectivities seeking a deferred and dislocated small-town imaginary.

***Manorama Six Feet Under* (2007, dir. Navdeep Singh)**

The case of *Manorama* is interesting from another standpoint. The film was not a part of the small-town wave but, alongside *Omkaara* (2006, dir. Vishal Bhardwaj), it was instrumental in opening up creative possibilities unexplored in the last few decades, possibilities that would later come to add to the appeal of the small-town. The town Lakhote pushes the spatial imagination of contemporary Hindi films into an orbit that can only vaguely be called a small-town. It imagines a space which would be its own referent, which could act as a cultural prototype cutting across a variety of habitats, yet not a space that would be constrained by a label. This spatial imaginary needs to be assessed not by what it is hinged to, but by what it manages to unhinge itself from – the rural or urban precedents. In the process, it manages to work out a new spatial language, an assemblage of quirks and peculiarities organized around an endless appetite for curiosity, which is perhaps its major opposition to the urban imaginary premised on indifference and anonymity.

An Indian retelling of Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), *Manorama* is a neo-noir with an amateur detective in a small, sleepy town called Lakhote in Rajasthan. He finds himself caught in a web of lies, deceit, and murder, and the literal as well as metaphorical desert that stands for the aridness and sterility of Satyaveer Randhawa's life. The traces of film noir are everywhere: a morally dubious, loveless world, populated by cynical and apathetic characters driven by their lusts and greed, a mysterious femme fatale sympathetic to the hero, the aging patriarch with his insatiable ravenousness for power, justifying his actions by appealing to the natural order of things, crooked cops, scummy goons, and nosey neighbours. However, this noir film does not inhabit the mean streets of a city with stark contrasts of light and dark; instead, it inhabits a relatively harsh and desolated spatial order of a back-of-beyond desert town, where scarred and pitted

monuments serve as the backdrop of existential ruminations. Lakhot is the kind of small-town where, unlike in a city, the private is not entirely separated from public; instead, it is threatened by the public. The public affairs are not protected by the state machinery either. Everyone wants to know who is sleeping with whom, yet at the same time, murder and other depraved crimes go unremarked.

Randhawa (Abhay Deol), an engineer suspended on corruption charges and a struggling part-time novelist, is offered to become a private detective since there is no private detective in the town. As the writer of a detective thriller, he must know something about detective work. During the investigation his mobility is successively diminished: first, goons steal his motorbike, then they break up his scooter, leaving him with no option but to thumb a lift back to town. Visually, the town is, as Mahadevan-Dasgupta writes in her *Frontline* review,

slow, dusty and provincial, scattered with stunted trees and immobile earthmovers. Everything seems to be covered with a thin layer of dust, and time itself seems to stand still in this corner of the hinterland. The vast, open spaces are only occasionally scattered with man-made structures – here a solitary water tank, there a government office, elsewhere a crumbling feudal palace to remind us of the several layers of history held within these buff-coloured landscapes. And even a promised canal that may never become a reality but in whose name tenant families are evicted, land is bought and sold, and the town is given another pipe dream to sustain its residents' imaginations for years. The Minister himself is the former raja of Lakhot – a reminder that feudal traditions tend to live on in different garbs. The small town waits endlessly for water, dreaming of the life-giving liquid, its taps running dry in mid-bath and its fish tanks offering vicarious relief in the midst of the dryness. Life in Lakhot is in fact a little like living inside a fish bowl, with everyone constantly watching everyone else. (Mahadevan-Dasgupta 2007)

Making a very interesting comparison between *Manorama* and Sriram Raghavan's city film *Johnny Gaddar* (2007) – both released around the same time – Mahadevan-Dasgupta (2007) makes a distinction between Randhawa floating inside his fish bowl, dragging himself from one day to the next, and Vikram living life in the fast lane unapologetically to make a quick fortune, having a dangerous affair, and thriving on mobility: using four modes of transport, he moves between three cities in two days. Randhawa, on the other hand, is the picture of the small-town everyman, convinced that he is meant for better things but not sure where the break is coming from – and eventually, not driven enough to worry too much about it. If Lakhot makes do with *chai*, *parathas* and *malpuas*, Mumbai thrives on fast food and pizzas. While Lakhot dreams of water, in Mumbai there is seemingly no dearth of anything. While Singh's *Manorama* is a subtle, nuanced exploration of the dark corners of small-town life, Raghavan's slick, witty caper hurtles from one close shave to another with breathtaking elegance (Mahadevan-Dasgupta 2007).

Yet, Mahadevan-Dasgupta suggests that both could be seen as 'neo-noir' films, one set in the city and the other in a small-town in the middle of the desert. In their different ways, she argues, 'they are filled with an atmosphere of unease, even menace'. *Manorama* discovers an all-new vocabulary of small-town film-noir. The opening montage indeed sets the mood right in the beginning:

A brief glimpse of a large elevated water tank standing alone in the middle of the desert is followed by a tracking shot that includes ants scurrying over the parched ground, a group of children huddled together near a small fire, and finally an overhead view of junior engineer Satyaveer Randhawa exiting the door of a Public Works Department site office and walking unhurriedly to his new motorcycle. In voiceover, Satyaveer tells us that his own life is as arid and uneventful as his hometown Lakhot. The place goes unnoticed by the outside world for most of the year, he says, making news only in the height of summer when hundreds of people

die because of the extreme heat, and in the height of winter, when an equal number die because of the cold. (Jabberwock 2008)

Integral to the film's construction of small-town aesthetics is the pace at which action unfolds. The emptiness of spaces comes to determine the emptiness of lives, the suspension of the engineer from his government job comes to determine the suspension of the natural pace and order of things. A small-town noir is not about dark corners and wet streets, it mobilises emptiness of space, inadequacy of resources, and the absence of fast-moving networks of the city, in order to articulate the darkness within the worldview. Predictably, then, the film lends character to its geographical location, it brings alive the space as an element within the narrative and setting.

***Ishqiya* (2010, dir. Abhishek Chaubey)**

Ishqiya marks the moment when small-town nostalgia finally lent itself to a mode of re-production. Thus, it is significant to situating the arrival of a rather ordinary film that merits a response and viewership not so much for what it is about as for how it presented itself in opposition to the usual city film. Branded as a north-Indian film noir that would showcase coarse language, raw sexuality of rural landscapes, techniques of unsophisticated seduction, etc., *Ishqiya* needs attention in relation to the cinematic journey of small-town nostalgia. Even though most of the film traverses rural landscapes, almost all of the early reviews it received read it within the already existing typology of 'small-town film', showering praise upon its realist representation of hinterland cultures of violence and hyperbole. For a young director's debut film, without a big star or a big production banner, the early projections are vital, but more importantly, the reviews helped establish the terms by which small-town simulacra was to be evaluated and discussed; *Ishqiya* was merely appended to a label which would continue to produce its audience.

Ishqiya's hinterland was to be seen in relation to a cinematic precursor in *Omkaara*, a metaphorical precursor in colourful, spicy, vulgar and spirited, and a discursive precursor in the divide between the city and the small-town, and between global Bollywood and rustic belonging. It was painted as 'tangy, pungent, sizzling and spicy stuff' and a 'distant cousin of *Omkaara*' (Adarsh 2010), 'a film with desirous flesh and pulsating blood' and a representative of 'small-town India is where the real stories are' (Gupta 2010). Most reviewers also produce a depiction of vulgarity and violence, two iconic features of the cinematic small-town: 'almost misogynist middles of India' (Shekhar 2010), 'full of delicious quirks and nuances' (Chopra 2010) and 'the backwater badlands of Eastern UP, with their characteristic gun culture, caste wars and edgy lingo' (Kazmi 2010). For Verma, *Ishqiya*'s UP is a 'self-sufficient town with malls, restaurants and beauty parlours' (Verma 2010), while Chopra draws us to 'a faded Lux soap-advertising calendar on the peeling wall', convinced that the dialogues are 'simple and real', while local swears are 'inexplicably delightful' to urban viewers (Chopra 2010). She also makes larger claims about the divide: 'Ours is a country divided into two – the city and small-town/rural. The rural is usually portrayed to suffer poverty and issues that the multiplex movie watchers can't identify with' (Chopra 2010).

Cutting across all these reviews is a notion of a space far beyond where the interesting stories lie, where the real is hyperbolic, rhetorical, and violent. The aggregation of these counterpoints puts together an acceptable reality not because it is inherently stable and anchored by the narrative, but because it draws its legitimacy from its opposition to the cinematic territory we are used to. Jha (2010), however, is not very convinced about the 'brutal bonding between the libido and the landscape'. Yet, the abusive and rhetorical

language and everyday erotics have now come to represent a more comprehensible order of 'real', thanks to the historical spatio-cultural confusion of the regular Bollywood menu. The same is taken to the next level in Kashyap's *Wasseypur* films. The small-town, therefore, becomes for the urban middle-classes a more believable habitat of aesthetic alterity that comes to represent the 'real' as opposed to the routine of 'cinematic real'. Jha (2010) calls these the aesthetics of 'toilet graffiti' and questions most pertinently:

But what of the film? How do we evaluate *Ishqiya* beyond its politically-charged verbally-lurid lunge at realism? Is the film to be applauded for forging a new language of expression? Or should that language have been used with more restraint and tact?

Ishqiya also clearly foregrounds its location in the various film posters where one can see the protagonists in open fields indicating *elsewhere*.⁷ This elsewhere-ness, I would argue, is central to the appetite of multiplex audience. An overwhelming percentage of them come from elsewhere, and contain within themselves alternative cultural and spatial imaginaries. These imaginaries can be consolidated even in an unstable moving-image document because the affective journeys they undertake are fuelled by an escape from their respective locations. The logic of dislocation that bridges the self and the symbolic thus builds up an extraordinary appetite for distortion, even as cycles of re-production and re-presentation dis-orient the self.

The easy and somewhat desperate collation of a large body of films within the category of small-town films is, on the one hand, a result of the above mentioned disorientation, and on the other, pushed to the extreme by its commercial potential. Earlier, *Bunty aur Babli* (2005), *Main Meri Patni aur Woh* (2005), *Paheli* (2005), *Dor* (2006), *Omkaara* (2006), and *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag* (2007) situated themselves within an alternative space. Since 2007, though, there has been a gradual rise of films that bring into their scope the small-town. After *Manorama*, we have seen *Gulaal* (2009), *Billu* (2009), and then, several films in 2010: *Ishqiya*, *Road to Sangam*, *Atithi Tum Kab Jaoge*, *Rajneeti*, *Udaan*, *Antardwand*, *Phas Gaye Re Obama*, *Daayen Ya Baayen*, and *Dabangg*, the biggest hit of the year.⁸ While all of the above mentioned films work on an alternative spatio-cultural logic different from that of the metropolis, the success of *Dabangg* marks the blockbuster arrival of the small-town as it now explodes onto the screen, with Salman Khan embodying its spirit. This allows a juxtaposition of the arrival of a star figure – a routine absence from the small-town films – onto an otherwise excluded space. *Dabangg* is an important film not only because it reminds us of the India outside of metropolitan cities, represents the spatial dynamics, visual registers, and cultural intonations of the small-town, but because it represents the arrival of the Bollywood star in the small-town (played by Salman Khan), who would go on to perform a parody of himself and also the small-town.

Dabangg re-establishes the tricky but magnetic relationship between Bollywood and the small-towns of north India, yet not without a critical take on them. It illustrates an enthralling performance that borrows from the tradition of spoof as much as it does from impersonation. It proposes a new model for the dialogics of cinema viewership by putting together the loud, exaggerated, larger-than-life, almost nonsensical, and chaotic kitsch, within a *real* location, even though the constituent elements of the *real* exist only in their parodied form – corruption, violence, patriarchy, vulgarity, rural poverty, deceit, and a generally compromised morality. By doing this, *Dabangg* smashes the barriers between metropolis and mofussil, multiplex and single-screen.

What can be argued is M. K. Raghvendra's claim in his essay 'A Renewal of Faith' that while *Peepli Live* was largely a multiplex hit, *Dabangg* has done exceedingly well in A, B and C centres. He adds, 'It would appear, therefore, that the success of *Dabangg* is

more symmetrically distributed across India' (2010, 33). Indeed it does, for it is partly Bollywood's reclamation of its lost territory. Avijit Ghosh (2010) furthers the uniqueness of *Dabangg* thus:

Earlier this year, two successful movies showed winds of change were blowing: *Ishqiya*, which was funny but niche in an adult sort of way, and *Rajneeti*, a political thriller. But Salman Khan's knuckle-crushing movie marks the thumping return of that delightful subgenre: the unapologetic mainstream masala action flick set in small-town north India. When they clap and dance even in multiplexes, you realise this movie has broken fresh ground. This is the revenge of small towns.

It may be going too far to read *Dabangg* as the revenge of small-towns, for it is actually a much more complex cultural document that needs to be seen in terms of the power and meaning of parody. Its strength lies in the superimposition of Salman Khan's star-text upon the notion of 'our cinema,' thereby celebrating an older imagination of mass audience. Yet, it is important to realize how the film constitutes its small-town and how it differs from its predecessors. Ghosh (2010) draws our attention to 'the *champakal* (handpump), the *chakki* and the thresher', and 'the extras dancing on the streets amidst shops of ittar, surma and bangles' who look like genuine small-town boys and girls. He terms the huge hit song *Munni badnaam hui* as the Bhojpuri-inspired floor-scorcher, suggesting more direct connections with the most assertive vernacular cinema industry of the past decade. Regarding the visual representation, he says, 'When did you last see a hero in a mainstream Bollywood film drinking from a water tap, dressed in a *lungi-ganjee*? To a substantial audience section, the movie evokes something barely remembered'. He insightfully reminds us,

Amidst all this masala, *Dabangg* unleashes an anti-hero seldom seen before. In traditional Bollywood, small-town and hinterland heroes are keepers of morality. Chulbul Pandey isn't. The hero with a name you are more likely to find in regional cinema than a premier Bollywood flick isn't a cross between a maryada purshottam Ram and a veer Arjun. He hates his step-brother, refuses to touch his step-father's feet and is abusive and corrupt. It is the sort of thing Shakti Kapoor used to do in the 1980s. Pandeyji doesn't really have a moral code; only a survivor's sharpness . . . Pandeyji could very well be the ethical template of millions watching the movie. (Ghosh 2010)

Conclusion

The body of films discussed above lend their weight to the argument that small-town nostalgia has lent itself to the emergence of a significant cultural economy around it. As the flavour of the cinematic small-town acquires its generic attributes and stands supported by the larger project of provincialising Bollywood – which started, I would argue, with gangster films locating themselves in Mumbai,⁹ the vernacular Bombay – the performative attributes of north-India manage to seep into a variety of films that may or may not directly locate themselves in small-towns. It is important to acknowledge this indirect presence, the shadows of small-town, in various recent films. If the early small-town films thrived on an exhaustion of dealing with representations in and of Bombay, the later ones also found solidarity in the rise of films based out of Delhi. Although it is not possible to explore the issue further here, it needs to be mentioned that cinematic Delhi emerged not as a competing metropolis but as a north-Indian congregation sitting on the tricky boundary between urban and elsewhere. Various localities within Delhi possess unique characteristics – the identitarian residue of a social-history of partition, migration and displacement – that lend themselves to be read as autonomous yet connected to the metropolitan network. If Dibakar Bannerjee has explored its diversity in his first three films set in the outskirts, *Band Baaja Barat*'s (2010, dir. Maneesh Sharma) Janakpuri is neither haunted by, nor fully integrated

into the Delhi that exists, as it were, outside its boundaries. Later, *Vicky Donor* (2012, dir. Shoojit Sircar) explores the same distance through Lajpat Nagar. Even though it is mostly dominated by a Punjabi characteristic, Delhi has become the synecdoche for north-Indian small-towns by hosting the *urban-provincial*, a performative counterpoint which finds resonances within the urban. This, indeed, has its precedents in the provincial turn to vernacular Bombay, later overwhelmed by the north-Indian dislocation. Relatedly, *Dhobi Ghat* (2011) too – though situated in Mumbai – accommodates the haunting presence of small-town migrants, and their subverted habitats, seen through frame-within-the-frame technique. Thus, the emerging spatio-cultural landscape of Hindi cinema is increasingly taking a provincial turn, even as provincial cinemas of vernacular variety – Bhojpuri in particular – are asserting themselves simultaneously on the horizon.

It would serve us greatly to acknowledge the importance of this surge not merely as marked by the shadows of small-towns, but also as films that set up a dialogue across spatiality, particularly between the small-town and the city. This dialogue takes place even as the small-town imaginary breathes its last. Even as the distinctions are slowly collapsing between the two through a developmental osmosis, small-town cinema is trying to arrest the slippage by instituting a cinematic distinction. In a sense, this cinema is a cinema of mourning. It mourns the loss of our small-towns and renders them a cinematic imagination, as is evident in *Dhobi Ghat* from how the residues of small-towns become a necessary externality to the city of dreams; they stare from within the blurred corners of the frames, evoking pathos.

The cities have been the axis of cinematic imagination in small-towns for as long as cinema has had a significant hold over people. Perhaps now we are slowly witnessing not only the small-town populations forced into cities and integrated into their futures, but also the small-towns arresting the cinematic imaginary back into their folds placing themselves on the urban map, though not so much in their distinctive materiality as much as through their cultural assertion – reconfiguring the language being the most pivotal register. On another significant note, this forces us to sincerely contemplate a possible burst of performativity from within what has been understood as the ‘pictorial turn’ (Mitchell 1994). Putting together the small-town films with the rise of many vernacular cinemas across India, an on-going tension between the performative and visual registers becomes palpable.

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Notes

1. It is true that the focus in the paper remains on metropolitan multiplexes, but the qualification cuts across multiplexes across the country primarily because as ‘The multiplex problem’ section discusses, the arrival of multiplexes often marks the emergence of a spatio-cultural segregation, of which the multiplex-mall becomes the means as well as the end. The tier-based classification of Indian cities follows from Sixth Central Pay Commission recommendations (see http://cdajabalpur.nic.in/6thpay_allowances/allowances.pdf for more) released in 2008, which converted the old category A-1 to X, A, B-1 and B-2 to Y and C and unclassified cities to Z. X, Y and Z are also referred to as Tier-I, Tier-II and Tier-III cities respectively.
2. See <http://kafila.org/2012/09/17/the-unreality-of-wasseypur-javed-iqbal/> (last accessed 19 January 2012) for a detailed first-hand account of a journalist’s visit to Dhanbad and his report on the coal mafia.
3. One would be reminded, among contemporary films, of Mani Ratnam’s *Raavan* (2010) in which the landscape of Kerala is mixed with Avadhi, spoken in UP. Also, *Billu Barber* (2008),

apparently set in UP is clearly shot in the western ghats. The problem therefore, is not just about 'movies about nowhere' for 'people from nowhere'; often the located films are the most obviously dislocated ones for they fail to draw anything from the location keeping in line with the mainstream tradition of 'movies about nowhere'.

4. See 'Tigmanshu Dhulia on His Films and Fundas' (<http://www.indiawest.com/news/3359-tigmanshu-dhulia-on-his-films-and-fundas.html>) on INDIAWEST website for Dhulia's defence of the box-office performance of *Haasil*, for example.
5. See 'Bollywood's Cult Acts' (<http://www.bangaloremirror.com/article/36/20090904200909041747472969ee713e0/Bollywood's-cult-acts.html>) on BangaloreMirror.com and 'Cult Movies: Down the memory lane' (<http://arpitgarg.wordpress.com/2009/02/19/cult-movies-down-the-memory-lane/>) on ArpitGarg's Weblog, for example. The obsession with the dialogues of the film is nearly matchless among the Hindi-speaking audience.
6. Perhaps its best parallel would be the dialogues of *Sholay*, especially *Tumhara naam kya hai Basanti?* [What is your name Basanti?] that remains to this day, perhaps one of the most popular film dialogues of all time.
7. For example, have a look at these film-posters of *Ishqiya*: <http://fullytimepass.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/ishqiya2.jpg> (last accessed 11 February 2012) and http://www.bookmymovie.in/movie_img/Ishqiya_movie_poster_x2x_in_1.jpg (last accessed 4 Feb 2012).
8. As I was writing this paper, another body of films was emerging in 2011. *Yamla Pagla Deewana* (2011) takes the NRIs through Benaras and then Punjab. *Tanu Weds Manu* (2011) also takes an NRI boy looking for a bride through a series of Indian small-towns. *Chalo Dilli* (2011) takes an investment banker through the city of Jaipur and the relative hinterlands of Rajasthan, to discover many faces of India. The yet another discovery of *real* India manages to hold them together, even as the figure of the NRI lends itself to a sort of homecoming. The predecessor for these films would be *Jab We Met* and even though they underline its lawlessness and chaos, they attempt an endearing portrait of the hinterland.
9. Particularly, *Satya* (1998) and *Vaastav* (1999) started the trend which instituted gangster cinema as opposed to grand family melodramas. The arrival of *Company* (2002) and *Kaante* (2003) furthered the trend among the major films. However, to a large extent, the trend was anchored by comedy films which took to a *gangster vernacular* and regularly parodied the character of mafia don, popularly called *Bhai*. Prominent among these early films would be Mahesh Manjarekar's films such as *Pran Jaye Par Shaan Na Jaye* (2003) and *Plan* (2004).

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