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Toward a New Junk Aesthetics? Narratorial Predicaments in Contemporary Alternatives in/to Bollywood

Subhajit Chatterjee

Another Indian New Wave?

This essay reflects upon specific aspects of a fashionable trend in Indian cinemas of the recent past that has provocatively pitted itself against the prudish and spectacular self-image of India's mainstream culture industry, now globally familiar as "Bollywood."[1] An insolent mutiny featuring urbane but dark and sardonic narratives in the face of Bollywood's dominant song-dance-drama spectacle has facilitated a resurgence of the proverbial coinage "new wave," which was associated with avant-garde experiments in Indian cinema of the late 1960s.[2] The work of its representative auteurs such as Anurag Kashyap, Dibakar Banerjee, or Sriram Raghavan feature points of overlap with generic varieties in Bombay cinema, particularly to the gritty urban gangster films of the nineties emblematized by Ram Gopal Varma.

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Such proliferation of narrative and thematic experimentations encountered initial hostility from the censor board but gradually gained consensus from the mainstream industry, its audience as well as critics.[3] The provocative sensibility evident in modestly budgeted Hindi cinema of the last decade has been particularly associated with the emergence of a cinephilic generation conversant with contemporary currents in world cinema.[4] Their spirited exploitation of international film styles led to celebratory endorsements in various cinephilic web platforms, often involving active intellectual participation from the filmmakers themselves.[5] The gradual influx of digital know-how, independent co-operative efforts, and the escalating base of the urban cinephile spectator-practitioner led to an expansion of such sensibilities influencing a variety of adventurous low-budget ventures from regional sectors.[6] The present moment is marked by a mixture of passion and apprehension in the public domain, as indicated by frequent debates around such ethos of provocation, mostly addressing their possible impact on and critical location vis-à-vis Bollywood. Here my primary intent is to foreground certain paradoxical stylistic propensities underlying this exciting narrative strain of the recent past that seem to capture a crucial predicament in Indian cinema's bid for alternative expressions in the realm of popular culture and spectatorial habituations.

An Alternative-Popular Cinema and Its New (A)morality

Perhaps the indefinite term *alternative-popular* is well suited to capture the impasse of this moment, in which products of generic transformations within the film industry seek to challenge the industrial film culture by infusing popular film narratives with vibrant, stylistic eccentricities and pushing spectatorial experiences into morally uncomfortable zones. It is instructive to reflect on what Anurag Kashyap describes as the promise of the "arrival" of "the great Hindi cinema" (and regional cinema in its footsteps) as "a new morality comes of age" through subversive enterprises of "a new crop of filmmakers" (Kashyap 2009b). Kashyap's longing for a mediated homecoming draws attention to growing correspondence between new generations of filmmakers and cinephile constituencies in India whose intellectual coordinates are located elsewhere. Kashyap also publicizes the trend's double-edged forte—a

critical familiarity with the complex textures of India's urban underbelly and cosmopolitan experience, coupled with a self-reflexive sarcasm toward narrative conventions of the dominant popular cinema (ibid.: 17).[7] Kashyap's rhetoric also belies an anxiety regarding "morality" and "acceptance" in relation to cultures of cinematic production and consumption in India. This relates to alternative-popular cinema's struggle for legitimatization both as a viable commercial enterprise and a creative intervention in the larger culture industry. In other words, whereas the familiar Bollywood genres—family romances, disability dramas, hinterland corruption, or urban gangster narratives, and so on—enjoy representational influence and popular recognition, the so-called alternatives find their route to a proper arrival uneasy despite intermittent box-office success and niche approval. What seems to be at stake here is their dual crisis—of their authority to represent a contemporary Indian ethos to a global audience and of their legibility as meaningful critical intervention to a national audience.

In fact, a hasty celebration of the alternative stream's subversive edge would be unwarranted in view of their complex relations to the changing marketing practices in the mainstream industry as well as the partisan nature of their own cinephilic endorsements. The points of reconnection and conflict between the film industry, new governmental networks, and cinephilic cultures may help us to situate the alternative visions of the popular. The economic forces of liberalization have not only expanded the market for Indian cinema but also ushered in new spectatorial configurations, owing to the free flow of global cultural forms through legitimate channels as well as pirate networks. Correspondingly, the media industry has generated new strategies of product differentiation and placement with an eye toward regulation and assimilation of new cultural experiences provided by platforms such as satellite television, cellular devices, and the Internet. In this context, it is crucial to observe the commercial and creative role of large production concerns such as UTV Motion Pictures or Viacom 18 in order to understand the industrial dynamics governing the upsurge of nonmainstream cinema. For instance, UTV's subsidiary brand, cannily named UTV Spotboy, has played a major role in the branding and viability of alternative products, thereby shaping representative films of the cycle such as *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (2008) and *DevD* (2009).[8]

On the other hand, the recent entrepreneurial makeovers of governmental networks such as the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC) testify to perceptible shifts in the role of the Indian state in modulating Indian cinema's transnational operations. The commitment of its former production wing Film Finance Corporation (FFC) to propagate sociopolitically relevant themes as well as rigorous formal experiments outside the industry has given way to a new organizational vision and concomitant policies that facilitate and oversee Indian cinema's technological transformations and cultural legitimacy. NFDC's commercial platform Film Bazaar was formed in 2007 to supervise the industry's adaptability to current global standards of artistic excellence and to help in the promotion and distribution of emergent generic and stylistic varieties in Bombay as well as regional cinemas in international film markets.[9] Quite predictably, the corporation now accommodates a wide range of parallel activities ranging from screenwriting labs, conferences, and training workshops to align its multicultural perspective with the sophisticated formal innovations showcased at premier international festivals.

However, at the level of aesthetic articulation, we observe a different sort of dilemma. In contrast to a disaffection with popular cinema that informed new Indian cinema's immediacy with transnational aesthetics and progressive politics during the 1960s, these contemporary alternatives demonstrate an obsessive engagement with popular tropes and modes of reception even as they attempt to disrupt such conventions. Most films of the cycle constructively engage with popular musical forms, feature colloquial humor, use edgy but spectacular image constructions, and often employ familiar middlebrow stars. In fact, the selection and structuring of some of these popular elements become significant in setting up their derisive narratorial tone. Thus, rather than instituting alternative cinematic forms and shaping the artistic and intellectual refinement of its spectator, the alternative-popular stream seeks to inject a criticality into popular culture itself through their instinctive collaboration with a self-taught and supposedly expanding cinephile audience base. But, interestingly such self-endorsement through the absorption of contemporary global experiments in film narrative exhibits an attitude of selective permeability. For instance, neither the resurgence of modernist-realisms in contemporary cinemas of Iran or Turkey nor the

contemplative, critical engagements with the European art cinema tradition in recent Asian cinemas have left any significant mark on the alternative ethos that I focus on here.[10] In fact, they seem to systematically refrain from austere, meditative narratorial stances, which characterize much of the canonical art cinema. This is despite Indian film culture's familiarity with such historical lineages through the traditional cinephilic infrastructures fostered by the film society movement.[11]

Rather, the alternative-popular cinema draws its inspirations from extreme tendencies discernible in recent Japanese, South Korean, and Euro-American cinemas that embrace eroticism, graphic violence, or black humor as modes of creative articulation.[12] Ironically, legitimate public access to such extremist film traditions is curtailed by censorial mechanisms overseeing the distribution of foreign products on media platforms in South Asia. On the other hand, there is no recognizable prehistory of extreme film practice or theorization in India to provide the larger public with a grasp of the creative interfaces between Indian and Euro-Asian extreme cinema beyond surface intertextual connections. For instance, the depictions of violence in Indian cinema have either been associated with individual and communitarian vengeance in popular films or have been used to underscore sociopolitical oppression in reformist narratives of the parallel tradition (e.g., the works of Shyam Benegal or Govind Nihalani). Even in the new spate of Bollywood corruption dramas (e.g., Prakash Jha, Ram Gopal Varma) the narrativizations of violence are designed to draw spectatorial empathy by focusing upon crises of social justice or of informal community ties. On the other hand, the influence of new extremisms is marked by a propensity toward staging violence through misanthropic spectacles often employing morally opaque perspectives that would provoke the conventional interpretative habits of the mainstream spectator.[13] It is precisely at the unstable juncture of the narratorial reworking of extremist-cynical styles and their desired narrative impacts where one can register the predicaments of the alternative-popular cinema.

New Junk Aesthetics and the Melodramatic Imagination

I seek to demonstrate with suitable examples that the disjuncture between these spirited filmic utterances invoking a new (a)morality and their nego-

tiation with the public imagination is perceptible in stylistic side effects and narratorial inconsistencies of specific kinds. Moreover, the discourse of alternative cinema itself is not well qualified to describe or analyze such effects that are often manifested as a displacement of their subversive aspirations into a struggle to make narrative value legible in cinematic work. In my analytic scheme, *narrative value* refers to both an abstract rationale propelling a creative enterprise and its aspired critical impact on the spectator. I would appeal to the melodramatic imagination as a veiled mediator defining the limits of the alternative-popular cinema's desired independence from the hegemonic moral worlds of Bollywood. By the term *melodramatic imagination* I do not refer to the formulaic polarities, stereotypes, or excesses of popular cinema that the alternative stream is critical of. My use of the term refers to Peter Brooks's revisionist elaboration of melodrama's primal narrative function as a mode of interpretation or expressive gesture toward the domain of value within a secular paradigm predominantly mobilizing the tropes of justice and victimhood (Brooks 1995). In this connection, I shall chart a conflicted tendency in the alternative-popular cinema to generate new narratorial forms that resemble the rhetoric of "junk" in the sense that it impedes or deflates articulations of narrative value. The term *new junk aesthetics*[14] that I employ to describe this cinematic tendency refers to stylistic flourishes that problematize the rendering of such value by displacement or suspension effects that often converge toward an apathetic narrative sensibility. It is *new* in that it is part of an ongoing differentiation in narratorial styles that the industrial or authorial discourses have not yet conceptually accounted for. *Junk aesthetics* also refers to the frequent mobilization of drug-induced fantasy, schizoid states, colloquial idioms, or deadpan humor as preferred narrative frameworks for critical elaborations of contemporary sociocultural traumas. To summarize my broad argument: alternative-popular cinema attempts to underline marginal habitats, urban psychic networks, and contemporary forms of victimhood by mobilizing a melodramatized public imagination, but their narratorial specificities often hinder or deflate such processes, owing to a production of self-disparaging effects.

Ranjani Mazumdar's important writings on this area qualify these experimentations in the margins of Bombay film industry as "fringe cinema" that mobilizes a different perceptual engagement with cityscapes as com-

pared to the generic polarities between the cinema of "panoramic interiors" (spectacular family dramas and romances) and "gangland Bombay" (urban gangster films and thrillers).[15] These new "urban fringe" dramas embody a "melancholic, sometimes sinister imagination" that estranges the spectator's convenient absorption into escapist seductions and redemptive possibilities offered by the melodramatic form (Mazumdar 2010: 150–81). Mazumdar's references to popular melodrama seem to be hinged upon the mediation of indigenous popular forms such as the Parsi theatre, which enabled accommodation of narrative and formal elements associated with the nineteenth-century European stage melodrama into Bombay cinema. While these familiar populist features become conscious objects of criticism for a new generation of filmmakers, there is yet another level at which their critical impulse remains ingrained in an ambiguous relationship with the melodramatic imaginary. Brooks's influential analysis differentiates between "the melodramatic imagination" as a "mode of conception and expression" and the melodramatic form that refers to the myriad generic assimilations and stylistic specificities embodied in the systematic popular responses to this imaginative mode in the aftermath of the French Revolution (Brooks 1995). The Brooksian account of melodramatic imagination is characterized by a strategic gesture toward significance, frequently using spectacles of oppression and suffering as narrative vehicles. Such operations of scratching through the surface of reality to reveal its fundamental moral dimensions draw attention to melodrama's efficacy as a semantic force field rather than merely a set of formal conventions. It should be an imperative to reflect upon the ways in which specific mediums may attempt to demarcate this dual register of melodramatic imagination—the need to document the real and simultaneously envision value, and to articulate the movement from the scene of the drama toward its true expressive dimensions. In the case of narrative cinema, primarily constrained by its registers of verisimilitude, the crucial task would be to stage a continuity between its iconic approximations of space and the desire to render their value legible to its public. In this formulation, the realist forms and melodramatic gesture are more likely to assume a relation of curious interdependence rather than one of mere antagonism. In other words, while filmic utterance attempts to adapt or represent a set of real conditions through available codes and conventions,

its actual challenge is to assign a critical value for its object. This is also the moment when cinematic language aspires to the mode of expression, beyond familiar modes of showing and telling.[16]

However, contemporary debates on melodrama have concentrated more on its formal elements and global incarnations. Thus what undergoes crises and subversion in Mazumdar's account of urban fringe is not the melodramatic imagination per se but rather a set of popular codes associated with melodramatic forms. Mazumdar's pitting of "fringe-grotesque" forms against a mainstream melodrama not only attests to the industrial discourses of branding the off-beat but also ignores the dimensions of the grotesque that may well be a gesture toward value albeit rendered inadequately by operative stylistic idioms. Peter Brooks's revisionary account also hints at a diffusion of melodrama's imaginative framework into public networks but stops short of its proper elaboration (Brooks 1994: 11–24). This dimension refers to the melodramatic imagination's gradual percolation into public experience, virtually instituting a melodramatic mode of reception. One could describe this as a melodramatization of public experience that enables reading of social as well as aesthetic events as value-laden signs. I would argue that the dominant stylistic proclivities of alternative-popular cinema demonstrate the fundamental conflicts between their aspiration to demolish melodramatic codes and their need to legitimize this very critical gesture in a melodramatized public experience. I would further contend that *subversion* as an analytic term is not well suited to capture this tortuous representational impasse involving such narratorial splits. I shall illustrate my arguments with reference to three distinct moments in the alternative-popular trajectory, in which the critical elaborations of social inequity, sexual identity, and moral disintegration are hindered by the narratorial techniques employed. Dibakar Banerjee's *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (2008) demonstrates alternative cinema's deadpan tweaking into a compassionate framing of criminality as a socioeconomic consequence. Sudipto Chattopadhyay's *Pankh* (2010) short-circuits its critical exploration of marginal sexuality by suturing it into a delusional narrative framework. Q's *Gandu* (2010), while sharing both these narrative propensities, modulates its stylistic tools toward a performative assemblage of junk elements envisioning cinema as a platform rather than an expressive medium. In all such instances, cinematic excavation of psychic

and urban spaces begins to confront the melodramatic vicissitudes of the spectatorial gaze.

Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye! and Narrative Apathy

Dibakar Banerjee based his second feature, the critically acclaimed dark comedy *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* (*Hey Lucky!*), on the intriguing life of Devinder Singh, alias "Bunty," a notorious thief and con man hailing from Delhi, who resumed a respectable civic life upon his prison release. The narrative of a criminal under reform was further sensationalized through Singh's multiple appearances in television talk shows and his scandalous dismissal from the fourth season of the hugely popular reality show *Big Boss*. A cursory scan of the circulating media discourse about Singh's enigmatic personality foregrounds how a variety of statements desperately attempted to ascribe significance to his experiential trajectory. Despite Singh's reluctance to articulate his personal exploits in affective terms, the news media reports and television talk shows, often featuring local psychologists, attempted to place Singh's delinquent nature in relation to his childhood traumas.[17] An interview-based article on Singh in the magazine *Tehelka* primarily focuses on consumerist culture's incessant demand for sensation as a hindrance to the ordinary man's attempted reforms. This narrative of media exploitation uses the metaphor of the mask to reveal the essential drama of identity that is trivialized by the "fairy dust of celluloid" (Jha 2010). Rajinder Singh, the police officer who tracked down Bunty and posthumously acted as his guardian and benefactor, points toward an essential moral drama—the conflict between Bunty's shadowy past and present aspirations for socialization. He also observed that Bunty's motivations were different: "He has never been violent or behaved inappropriately with a woman (ibid.)." The mainstream critics' positive responses to the film version were frequently based upon similar ascription of moral significance to the protagonist's comical escapades and sarcastic demeanor.[18] The image of a quintessential antihero of Indian popular cinema—the pleasant criminal as a victim of social injustice—seems to loom large in the public consciousness.

The dynamics of the uncontrolled proliferation of consumerism coupled with a stratified access to wealth are invoked by Dibakar Banerjee him-

self when he rationalizes his fiction as a narrative dealing with justice. He argues, "Stolen cars, drive to hill stations, fancy knick knacks for his house. It reflected the hollowness of society that makes material things desirable but lays out rules about who can have them (ibid.)." But the filmmaker's unease over his modern fable is palpable when he reflects, "But I am also a bit anxious to see if the audiences will see fully below the laughs and the adventures of my thief. I hope they will see what I am trying to show—the darker side of the new India."[19] At one level, the problem is about the spectatorial competence to appreciate the critical dimensions of the black comedy genre, not having too many antecedents in Indian cinema. But at another level, the comment seems to foreground apprehensions about contemporary cinema's capacity to perform the dual task of representation—to capture the vibrant textures of indigenous urban experience through the grids of a new realism (that is sensitive to spaces, affects, and dialects constituting local realities) and to underline the gesture that such stylized approximation of the "real" ought to make toward larger historical and political determinations.

It is interesting to note that the only player that refuses to participate in this contest over significance is the film narrative itself, despite authorial intentions to the contrary. *Oye Lucky!*'s story centers on the life of a thief and suave con man, Lucky Singh, who hails from a middle-class Sikh family located in Delhi. The plot charts his troubled and delinquent childhood, romantic interests, his professional dilemmas, camaraderie and betrayals—all interspersed by a comical trajectory of captures and escapades. However, the narratorial mapping of Lucky's psychological experiences seems to undergo systematic displacements and deflations at those crucial points where it could ascribe the story with symbolic valence. One possibility of configuring affect and motivation to Lucky's actions appears during his adolescent encounter with random violence and death. The sequence in which the group of friends peep at the dead body of their peer, presumably murdered during a local gang feud, features manipulations of the sound track in which multiple rhythms and tunes wash off the echoes of the wailing crowd. Moreover, the shift of sonic texture from a heartbreaking to a frivolous one is orchestrated with a sluggish panoramic camera movement marking a shift of Lucky's attention toward his material objects of desire—a neighborhood girl passing by on a scooter. The curious elision of the violent

act itself coupled with this stylistic approach restricts the perception of the tragic event to the juvenile group's ignorant responses to the gloomy aspects of the portrayed reality. This is one among several instances in which the moral framework required for spectatorial recognition of the protagonist's self-destructive impulses is impeded by narratorial mechanisms.

The problem of narrative as well as psychological development is noticeable in the depiction of Lucky's career trajectory, which does not seem to acquire any fundamental expansion with his accomplishments. In other words, he becomes and remains a petty thief whose preoccupations amplify only in quantity but not quality. In fact, the theft sequences are mostly set against inventive Punjabi folk dance music *(bhangra)* and hip-hop remixes along with sound motifs that seem to forego their dramatic intensity in favor of comical incredulity. Consequently, the acts of theft acquire an obsessive and repetitive dimension progressively culminating in a disorganized piling up of inconsequential items ranging from violins to birthday cards, picture frames, and pet dogs. At the level of the plot, the thief's journey embodying multiple spatial displacements, captures, and escapes seems to produce a sense of circularity and stasis rather than conventional progression and denouement. At a more symbolic level, the narrative seems to detach itself from discourses of struggle or justice by foregrounding a sense of obsessive acquisition without recourse to value.

While such circularity of narrative structure may be read as urban fringe cinema's critique of melodramatic closure, a closer scrutiny would also reveal its automated eschewing of a gesture toward social critique. The narrative of *Oye Lucky!* takes off from the point where the captured thief is being transported to a press conference announcing the retrieval of a huge assortment of stolen goods. The story is narrated through flashes of recollection of various phases and adventures in his life. A successful deployment of this narrative structure would require the spectatorial gaze to be brought back with perceptive insights regarding the complex realities of his disenfranchisement and everyday struggle. But such trajectories are suspended, as evident from the narrative culmination of the penultimate sequence. As Lucky is escorted by police through a crowd comprising his victims, curious onlookers, and the news media, a novice reporter suddenly inquires about his future plans. Lucky's mocking reply, "An Indian voyage [*bharat darshan*], would you tag along?"

connotes an oft-repeated creative aspiration of alternative filmmakers—to probe into the reality of new and liberated India. The scene immediately plunges into a meticulous italicization of this critical gesture through the suspension of ambient sound, the evocative use of mobile pans in slow motion, and a musical motif earlier associated with his affective memories, almost culminating in a moment of epiphany. However, the palpable absence of any subjective images, flashbacks, or voice-over disrupts the development of the tableau, rendering it an empty sign. The disjuncture is made all the more tangible by the sudden transition of the emotionally potent image into a blunt medium shot of Lucky inside a plane being casually interrogated by accompanying police officers. What seems to be suspended in such instances is the ordering of narrative as a culmination of experience, be it toward processes of resolution or toward critical reflection.

It is also important to read such disjuncture in contrast to the Bombay gangland narratives that often sustain their moral drama through mediating voice-over tracks. For instance, in Ram Gopal Varma's representative films *Satya* (1998) or *Company* (2002), this aural element structures spectatorial engagements with the intricacies and conflicts within illicit networks and masculine bonding in the urban gangster community. In the case of *Oye Lucky!*, such a framing device is relegated to media speech bearing a mock resemblance to sensationalist crime-busting shows on television channels like Zee TV or Star News. Instead of providing a perspective on Lucky's exploits, this satirical frame, working in tandem with other ironic devices, collapses the crucial contrast between his subjective experience and its recounting from an institutional point of view. The intervention of the ludicrous channel anchor into the closing image to announce the celebrity thief's miraculous escape as we watch Lucky casually disappearing across a street provides a paradigmatic instance of antirelief as a junk-narrative effect.

The spectatorial gaze scanning the text to register a precious critical indication would have to strive rather hard in these (a)moral dramatic incarnations. A brief, almost incidental clue is located during one in a series of Lucky's repetitive break-ins. In the course of piling up random acquisitions into his car, he accidentally shatters a small earthen coin bank, an auspicious emblematic object storing resources for moments of crises that are improb-

able in the upper-middle-class localities he invades. His impulsive and scandalous act of kicking away the spilled coins could easily be read as a *mise en abyme* for the narrative's critique of class exploitation was it not for its barely noticeable stature. The apathy articulated in the process of editing that loses such a fundamental symbolic gesture in the pile of inconsequential thrills is not limited to the question of character and psychology but spills into the narrative form itself.

Pankh and Its Delusional Self-Reflexivity

Sudipto Chattopadhyay's debut feature *Pankh* (*The Wings*, 2010) is a relevant example of a junk by-product of the mainstream industry's creative exploitation of a blooming niche audience fostered by the pirate circulation of foreign movies.[20] Its parent production company, White Feather Films, was formed in 2001 by producer-director Sanjay Gupta and the veteran film star Sanjay Dutt and had a reputation for unauthorized popular remakes of American and Asian cult films featuring controversial or violent themes. UTV Motion Pictures inaugurated a dedicated television channel for dissemination of global cinema in 2008, and in the same year, White Feather launched its short-lived, specialized brand Arthouse Films to aid alternative efforts within the industry. *Pankh*, the brand's first venture, dealing with a controversial theme of transvestism and sexual identity, was eventually released with several modifications and deletions after a brush with the censor board regarding its provocative use of nudity and verbal abuse. *Pankh*'s story deals with the identity crisis of the erstwhile male child artiste Jai, alias "Baby Kusum," who achieved popularity playing female roles in the film industry. But Chattopadhyay's melodramatic aspiration to symbolize the tribulations associated with the industrial tradition of cross-gender performance takes on a self-corrosive appearance, owing to its narratorial style.[21] The narrative recollects Jai's troubled childhood and professional traumas through flashbacks that are juxtaposed with his mother's present eagerness for him to resume his career in the face of economic distress. A parallel thread depicts the protagonist as a junkie whose hallucinatory encounters with an actress in the form of a seductive yet hostile fairy drive much of the

film's quasi-philosophical musings. The most striking feature of the film is its relentless echoing of the protagonist's flamboyant delusions through a crude and stylized staging of both his memories and hallucinations. The narrative spaces are infiltrated by a frenetic excess of mobile perspectives, canted frames, extreme low angles, and extensive circular tracks, further accentuated by sudden intrusions of the female apparition alongside a mock-chorus troupe against lurid backdrops. The resultant effect of such stylistic distortions, which are partly derived from the assimilation of modernist devices in the popular media, is a collapse of the distinction between narrative and psychic space and thereby of the critical distance requisite for any reflective engagement.

For instance, it is interesting to note how the film studio, a dramatic space providing a key to the protagonist's background story of exploitation and erotic fantasies, is rendered an ambiguous psychic projection. The mother and son's entry through a darkened hallway and their journey across the existing studio lot are marked by extreme long shots, abnormally low angles, and undulating camera movements overlaid with unreal verbal exchanges regarding the illusive nature of cinema. The synthetic effect of the mise-en-scène is all the more conspicuous, owing to the near absence of location shooting in contrast to similar experimental forays set in an urban milieu. While the studio lot itself begins to resemble dilapidated ruins of a once thriving industry, such metonymic exposition of spaces are bereft of symbolic import because of distracting techniques that continually align them with misguided or hallucinatory perceptions. In a strange encounter Jai's erstwhile mentor-director and his buddy-turned-stuntman both refuse to identify him with their doting recollections of starlet Baby Kusum, thereby smearing Jai's affective reminiscences with delusion. Similar ambiguities are apparent in the sequence at Jai's idolized actress Nandini's apartment building, where she refuses to entertain him while the narration refrains from divulging her identity and hints at unresolved collisions between objective reality and the protagonist's fantasy world. Such narrative operations akin to mirage effects are explicitly acknowledged when a cynical exchange regarding identity crisis between Jai and the fairy-actress is suddenly rerouted toward the film's thoughtful spectator. The dialogue exchange is illuminating in itself:

The Fairy: Are you transgender [a *hijra*]?
Jai: Huh! You're once again entwined in that old conflict. Let's assume that I *am* a transgender person, so what? . . .
The Fairy: You don't even know whether you are a boy or a girl!
Jai: Don't worry about me, honey! But who are you to comment?
The Fairy: Let's ask the audience. What do *they* think?" (my translation)

At this point, the couple faces the camera while bearing an interrogative posture, and the protagonist moves forward to dismantle the narrative as well as the critical frame with his condescending declaration, "I am the protagonist as well as the spectator of this story."

In a predictably bizarre climactic sequence, the protagonist's hysteric act of castration in front of his traumatized mother unleashes a sea of blood in which they both float around. The possibility of a frantic critical gesture toward social indifference and exploitation remains destabilized by the lurid mise-en-scène, which refuses to accord the spectator any objective access to spatio-temporal coordinates of the narrative culmination. It is crucial to note a few things about the narrative of *Pankh*—first, although it uses popular tropes and middlebrow stars, its nature of staging is much more nervous and subjective to qualify as spectacle in the conventional Bollywood sense. Secondly, satirical modes in such instances purport to intervene into populist practices and their complacent reception. But insofar as marking its differences from the dominant cinema is concerned, some of these new stylistic idioms seem to be either hesitant or nonconversant with the existing models of critical decipherment or value generation. Considering the renowned critical distinction between *histoire* as a tendency to obliterate traces of enunciation from narrative and *discours* referring to reflective foregrounding as well as political excavation of such inundated processes, it is difficult to account for the sort of irony exemplified in texts such as *Pankh*. There are polyvalent rifts between their production logic, narrative design, and critical aspirations that are manifested through processes of auto-effacements I am trying to elaborate upon. As I have discussed elsewhere, the narratorial operations in such instances tend to acquire the structure of banter, speech idioms devoid of communicative value or points of discursive anchorage (Chatterjee 2013).

Q, an advertising professional turned producer-director based in Kolkata, shot to fame with his low-budget Bengali digital feature *Gandu* (*The Loser*, 2010). It was strategically produced as a provocative experiment featuring a dismal theme layered with graphic sex, freewheeling slangs, inventive song lyrics, and rap-rock sound track. Showcased at several international festivals like Berlin and Slamdance, the film achieved wide recognition as a radical alternative or anti-Bollywood product—labels that were partly endorsed by the filmmaker's vocal disdain for mainstream cinema.[22] Anticipating censorship hostility and the lack of a distribution network for hardcore or extreme content in India, the film was never submitted to the censor board, thereby enjoying clandestine digital circulation and few festival screenings. But the international exhibitions, sensationalist web promotions, and ensuing media attention fostered its cult status, leading to eventual sale in foreign markets.[23] Although the film's production tactics and ingenious marketing outside an industrial network merit analytic attention, I shall keep my current discussion restricted to its relevance for the predicaments of the alternative-popular aesthetic under scrutiny.

As an experimental enterprise, *Gandu* forges an unorthodox rhetoric of popular protest through a strategic reworking of contemporary cinephilic, musical, and narrative traditions that are accessible to a global metropolitan audience but remain unexplored as creative resources in Indian film culture. The film is a creative assimilation of an extensive range of inspirations such as the rap and hip-hop cultures, urban protest music, vox pop, indie production techniques, Euro-Asian extreme film genres and politicized pornography, as well as strands of literary modernism and folk-philosophical systems in Bengal. Predictably, *Gandu*'s form and staging technique adopts an episodic pattern, shifting with reference to the above-mentioned idioms but without requisite narrative motivation. Focusing on this assemblage form, *Gandu* may be better considered as a hybrid installation-act on a cinematic platform rather than a subversive filmic expression in the traditional sense. But the exploration of this new performative aspiration in and of cinema comes into conflict with the artist's own endorsement of his alternative practice as a mode of critical dialogue with dominant film culture. In this

dynamic, *Gandu* remains obligated to a reflective statement of its purpose, to justify its relevance as an independent as well as subversive artifice. Let us briefly delve into the textual tensions between impulses of storytelling, critical enunciation, and that of performance.

Gandu's flimsy plot centers on the habitual drifts of a delinquent, middle-class school dropout and his escapades from the all-encompassing squalor through his alter ego—an abrasive rap artist. The narrative works on two disparate affective registers—the protagonist Gandu's troubled relationship with his mother, who lives as a mistress to a local businessman, and his candid, hallucinatory "trips" with Ricksha, a neighborhood rickshaw puller and fanatical devotee of the popular martial-arts icon Bruce Lee. One can immediately discern the film's thematic liaison with a dominant strand of alternative-popular narratives dealing with disenfranchisement and "lumpenization" of the urban middle class after the onset of economic liberalization. In fact, the most emblematic catchphrase of the film appears during one of the duo's drug-induced conversations shot on top of the walls of a dilapidated factory. Gandu reiterates a random question, "Hey Ricksha, will I die if I fall from here?" to which Ricksha replies, "Your mind is completely fucked!" It is instructive to note that a host of these alternative films engage with the theme of "middle-class vertigo," which is defined in cultural rather than economic terms. Such narratives of downward mobility often map secret urban histories, drawing attention to platforms of exchange between the middle and the lower strata of society that are under the constant vigil of state and civic apparatuses.[24]

However, the filmmaker's parallel ambition of articulating a new language of protest through filmic performance produces cognitive obstacles to the legibility of such politics from a spectatorial perspective. At the outset, one must pay heed to the ambiguity inherent in the politics of naming. The two lead characters are addressed by their respective social status. *Gandu*, a colloquial Bengali slang, insinuates the protagonist's insignificant socioeconomic role. *Ricksha*, on the other hand, is a signifier alluding to the nameless, unorganized working-class sector that the character hails from.[25] Upon being asked his name, the protagonist nonchalantly replies, "[Everyone] calls me Gandu." Rather than marking the subject's anguish or ideological entrapment, such reflexive gestures appropriate bigoted social

codes as conduits for arrogant self-fashioning. It is in this light that one can also analyze the disturbing convergences between the film's spectacular and narrative aspects. The rap-musical fragments, instead of being marked as agonized expressions, attempt to induce frontal encounters that sever the distinctions between delusional interiority and its narrative framing. Despite being projected as a figment of the protagonist's imagination, Gandu the rapper seems always already programmed to demand absolute complicity from the spectatorial gaze. In fact, spectatorial access to diegetic meaning is clearly mediated through the protagonist's rambling visions. As I shall elaborate upon below, the narrative unfolding reveals a paranoid structure whereby the spectator gradually loses the capacity to distinguish between interiorized fantasy and its exterior or spatial frames of reference.

One could also read these conflicting elements as a symptom of a new performative aspiration that seeks to reconfigure conventional relationships between spatial and ideological registers of narrative. Here it may be convenient to distinguish between the modalities of denomination, which assign value to cinematic space in the tradition of an expressive gesture, and a reappropriation of filmic locations toward fantasmatic nominations. The inventive location specificities informing the new realisms forged by independent cinemas undergo a curious dislocation in these instances of staging, which smears them with extraordinary and often obscure qualities. For instance, in the fascinating sequence depicting Gandu and Ricksha's first roadside encounter, there is a reiteration of a political graffiti of the youth wing of the reigning Communist Party. On the surface, the sign seems to frame the decadent nature of their encounter through the prism of sociopolitical turmoil unleashed by new economic forces and the contemporary crises of Left politics in Bengal.[26] In this reading, the location acquires an evocative quality through its ability to hint at the sociopolitical dimension of the constituent action. However, this sequence begins with Gandu's rhythmic exit from his house through a narrow alley accompanied by an Asian Dub Foundation track playing on his earphone. Gandu's movements are framed and edited in a precise way so as to elicit a playful response from the surroundings, as illustrated by the coordination of the music track and dance steps to the swinging of the nearby clothesline. A nominative logic is underscored by the following shots depicting Gandu's self-engrossed marking of

neighborhood walls and houses with a symbol combining the shorthand for his name and a pointer to his residence. The sequence culminates in a collision of the two protagonists followed by Ricksha's farcical mimicry of typical martial-arts postures in response to Gandu's string of abuses. The foregrounding of these performative aspects serves to deflect the politicized marking of urban space toward the hailing of a new encounter between mediated subjects fostering their fantasized selves—a protest rapper and a working-class warrior.[27]

In this connection, it is important to locate the relationship of spatial dislocations with the ambiguous narrative structure of *Gandu*. Contemporary readings of the specificities of alternative aesthetics in Bollywood often foreground their violent and inhospitable rendering of urban spaces as sprouting from outcast or marginal perspectives. But another characteristic tendency of alternative-popular narratives is their simultaneous destabilization of such marginal perspectives through the invocation of a delusional framework echoing contemporary mind-game narratives.[28] The story of interclass male bonding in *Gandu* systematically foregrounds marginal spaces within and beyond cityscapes ridden with filth, squalor, and developmental dilemmas. Gandu and Ricksha frequently traverse unkempt riverbanks, rail tracks, shabby construction sites, run-down buildings, and factories while mostly engaging in banter or consuming various narcotic substances. But the narrative logic of *Gandu* is not restricted to an alternative mapping of such spaces. A delirious framing of these locations, often employing extreme angles or movements, is conspicuous in sequences depicting the candid verbal exchanges between the two friends. In one specific instance, this is marked by shifts across disparate locations without any identifiable motivation or temporal markers. The sequence begins with a stylized top shot of a decrepit rooftop and, in the course of the friends' abuse-ridden exchange, shifts to a derelict locale underneath the new bridge connecting Kolkata and its satellite town Howrah. Here, Gandu performs the opening lines from one of his Bengali rap compositions to enlighten Ricksha about the communicative possibilities of the musical form:

All night Horihor wakes and frets
Which Bollywood heroine shall he get into bed?

Whose cunt should he lick, whose tits should he suck?
He frets and wanks, wanks and frets. (my translation)

The lyrics testify to an abrasive albeit overblown critique of mainstream consumerism and its pornographic rationale within which the protagonist is deeply entrenched, while the visual framing through an extreme low angle renders the space a defiant podium set against the overhead bridge as a developmental signifier. The nominative moment is marked by the camera's sudden forward thrust to align the spectatorial gaze with Rickhsha's awe-struck reaction to the unfamiliar vocal rhythm adorning the recognizable slang.[29] However, such strategic alignment mobilizing spectatorial complicity into a sardonic critical staging is jeopardized by a paranoid denouement revealing the extent of the narrative's delusional status.

The film's climactic sequence begins with split-frame scenes foregrounding miraculous realizations of Gandu's fantasies regarding sex, money, and fame intercut with a feverish runaround of the lead pair. Careful attention to the final association of images reveals the fragile nature of the protagonist's gaze as we repeatedly encounter images of Ricksha's body twirled against a pole with a drooping head alluding to his symbolic death by hanging. The ambiguous scene is set alongside a further collage of morbid images comprising an ominous transvestite figure reminiscent of the destructive goddess Kali and a mysterious pot-bellied figure moving forward with an earthen pot. The culminating image of Gandu protruding his tongue toward the earthen snake pot alludes to the character's sinister demise through hard-core substance abuse. But it also operates as a clinical reminder of the unreal and indistinct nature of Gandu's perceptions as well as of the diegetic world that was restricted to his perspective. Such deployments of privatized fantasy as a central narrative frame testify to a resistance toward rendering moral and political gestures transparent to a public gaze.[30] For the time being, they operate on the register of floating self-reflexive articulations that are suspicious of the normative complacency of story or the idealist expressivity of discourse. But this condition raises a pertinent question about the nature of spectatorial investment and narrative contract that can legitimize such forms as relevant artistic enterprises. However, if one considers *Gandu* a performative event, its episodic and musical structure can

be envisaged autonomously, not in the sense of self-sufficient music videos but, rather, as enunciations that can be relocated into platforms other than cinema. Perhaps the most telling symptom of such performative attitudes comes through in the filmmaker's double rendition of the film's only explicit reference to realpolitik—a political speech on concurrent economic inflation, which is transformed from its initial use as expressive ambient sound into a frenzied musical track adorning the nude orgy during the end titles. The track, cannily titled "Protest," was part of the traveling multimedia act *Gandu Circus*, featuring rap performances by the filmmaker alongside live music, sound mix, and projection of images from the film and its outtakes as well as peripheral image fragments citing global protest movements.

In my analysis of alternative-popular film narratives in India's recent past, I have tried to highlight a certain narratorial inclination that tends to inject ambiguity and torsion into their critical enterprise. However, this is not a consistently evolving propensity, possibly owing to the artists' incognizance about all its mechanisms and effects. My critical reading wishes to break ground toward charting such nascent forms of cinematic performance or newer levels of differentiation in narratorial styles that aspire toward abrasive critique of popular cinema. To reconnect such tendencies with the contemporary forms of cinephilia, one must visit historical evolutions of expressivity in modern cinema and analyze its crises and recuperations with the onset of irreverent film forms.[31]

Notes

1. For a critical account of cultural effects of Bollywood and their global reception, see Rajadhyaksha (2009) and Vasudevan (2008: 149–73).
2. The "new cinema movement" in India originating in the late 1960s drew inspiration from the New Wave in France as well as a range of non-Western alternative movements that redefined the political scope of cinema in the aftermath of the Second World War. See Sen and Kaul (1968). However, the products of the movement were ridden by ideological disparities ranging from reformist rhetoric (e.g., Shyam Benegal) and middle-class dilemmas (e.g., Basu Bhattacharya) to abstract, formalist exercises (e.g., Kumar Shahani and Mani Kaul) or overtly politicized aesthetics (e.g., Mrinal Sen's city films).
3. Kashyap's first feature, *Paanch* (*Five*, 2003), which centered on gruesome murders within an amateur rock group, was banned for its apathetic display of violence, while the release

of his second feature, *Black Friday* (2004), got stalled, owing to its controversial retelling of the Bombay blast events of 1993, whose convicts were under trial. Years later, *DevD* (2009) became an instant hit despite its audacious, sarcastic tone and gathered a cult following.

4. Popular media have generated catchphrases that often operate in a grey zone between critical endorsement and branding. See Rekh (2010), Pal (2010), Verma (2011).
5. Web forums, like Passionforcinema (PFC), Indianauteur (IA), and Dearcinema (DC), committed to exploring contemporary Indian cinema in light of global experiments in film forms, have been largely supportive of the alternative sensibility, often featuring active participation of a Kashyap fan base and filmmakers such as Kashyap or Banerjee themselves. For an elaborate mapping of the cinephilic nexus around new streams of Bombay cinema with particular focus on the PFC forum, see Ghosh (2010).
6. Recently, independent filmmakers from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, or Bengal featuring unconventional aesthetic tendencies have been critically associated with this "new wave." Examples include Umesh Kulkarni's *Valu* (*The Bull*, 2008), Satish Manwar's *Gabricha paus* (*The Damned Rain*, 2009), Thiagarajan Kumararaja's *Aranya kandam* (*The Forest Episode*, 2010) or Kaushik Mukherjee's (alias "Q") *Gandu* (*The Loser*, 2010).
7. For a mapping of such witty and sarcastic tropes, see Ghosh (2010) and Sengupta and Brahmachari (2009).
8. Predictably, UTV's initial foray into television and cinema was supplanted by production and marketing of a variety of new media entertainment forms. See Kashyap (2009a: 47–49).
9. The managerial vision of NFDC's new director, Nina Lath Kumar, has contributed immensely to this recent makeover. See Jhunjhunwala (2014).
10. For recent writings on such influences, see Chaudhuri and Finn (2003: 38–57), Weinberger (2007: 5–16), Martin (2003), and Betz (2010: 31–47).
11. For an account of Indian film society activism, see Rao (2009). Certain strands of experimentation in contemporary Indian cinema are deeply influenced by the formal radicalism of Shahani and Kaul, who in turn have acknowledged their debt to austere traditions of European modernism (Robert Bresson, Michelangelo Antonioni). However, these currents are visible in the works of artist-filmmakers such as Amit Dutta, Ashish Avikunthak, Vipin Vijay, Kabir Mohanty, and others, who are summarily dismissive about popular as well as narrative cinema and often work outside the commercial circuit exhibiting exclusively in festivals and gallery spaces. See Gangar (2010).
12. The popular media as well as the filmmakers associated with this trend in India have frequently acknowledged influences of contemporary provocateurs such as Quentin Tarantino, Lars Von Trier, Gaspar Noe, Takashi Miike, and Kim Ki-duk, among others.
13. The historical specificities of the global upsurge in sensationalist film forms have just begun to be explored in a systematic manner. See Horeck and Kendall (2011) and Choi and Wada-Marciano (2009).
14. My use of the term has no connection to the pulp fictional forms that it is usually associated with. See Roberts (1990) and Caroll (2001).

15. Their primary features would include dystopic architectural elaborations and subversion of existing codes of gender and criminality in Hindi popular cinema. See Mazumdar (2007).
16. It would be interesting to revisit the history of narrative cinema in light of Brooks's insights in order to locate how the problem of incorporating the act of italicization or significant emphasis in cinema is successively resolved within various formal parameters, the Griffithian melodrama being its primordial instance.
17. For instance, see the talk show aired on the channel Live India (Singh 2009). Singh originally hailed from a slightly dysfunctional middle-class Sikh family residing in a congested locality near West Delhi. He developed wayward tendencies and allegedly got thrown out by his abusive father during adolescence.
18. See Chopra (2011: 346).
19. See Banerjee (2008). In fact, analytic reflections on such populist imagination, in their attempt to disentangle the historical determinations overseeing the middle class's moral degeneration, often echo Banerjee's own distinctions between a surface fun and the critical core of such narratives. See Kapur (2011: 197–216).
20. A scramble for acquisition of rights to acclaimed festival fare resulted in a world cinema boom in the home video market through collaborations between Moser Baer and Palador Pictures in 2005 and between NDTV India and a Time Warner subsidiary, Lumiere Films in 2009.
21. The venture was admittedly inspired by Dilip Ghosh's documentary *Aadhi Haqeeqat, Aadha Fasana* (*Children of the Silver Screen*, 1990), which explored the traumatic experiences of child artistes in the Bombay film industry. See Sudipto Chattopadhyay's interviews in Mukherjee (2008) and "My Cinema Is about Damnation!" (2008).
22. See Sen (2011), Mangaokar (2012).
23. In India *Gandu*'s public screening was limited to small-scale festivals in Orissa and Delhi. The film's overseas rights were sold to distribution platforms such as Jinga Films (UK) and Artspolitation Films (USA) specializing in edgy content and extreme genres.
24. For a contemporary literary elaboration of such themes, see Mehrotra (2009).
25. In Bengal, commuters regularly use such generic mode of address for professional rickshaw pullers or taxi drivers as opposed to more respectful titles such as *dada* (brother) reserved for correspondences among the middle class.
26. The film was shot during a period when the Bengal's ruling Communist Party was undergoing several crises in the wake of political as well as public protests against violent police encounters linked to the government's appropriation of agricultural land for private industrial enterprises. The party's battle with emergent political forces resulted in its catastrophic defeat in the West Bengal Assembly Elections of 2011, thereby ending three decades of Left rule in Bengal.
27. Kaushik Mukherjee's commentary on the politics of his own rechristening as "Q" bears allusion to such dissociative textual effects. He speaks of a creative conflict between his two projected subjectivities, the filmmaker Q and the rapper-performer Gandu, both of whom

are absolved of their Bengali middle-class trappings through inducted fantasies (Kaushik Mukherjee, unpublished video interview by author, Overdose Joint, Kolkata, April 30, 2011).

28. Thomas Elsaesser (2009: 13–41) maps the multifarious ways in which complex narratives in contemporary world cinema instigate the spectator to engage in cognitive interactions as well as vivid psychological investments. The delusional narrative structure I refer to is a subset of this category but must be sharply distinguished from narratives dramatizing mental disorders in which the ambiguity is posited as an enigma that achieves narrative denouement (e.g., *A Beautiful Mind*, dir. Ron Howard, 2001; and in the Indian context, *Karthik Calling Karthik*, dir. Vijay Lalwani, 2010).
29. The use of slang in *Gandu* is presented as an affective mode of exchange also alluding to personalized languages of protest. However, it should be pointed out that the use of slang as a mode of creative expression owes its lineage to postindependence literary modernism in Bengal, which elicited ample legal and moral controversies around the work of writers associated with the Hungryalist movement of the early sixties and their influence in the works of Sunil Gangopadhyay, Samaresh Bosu or, more radically, that of Subimal Mishra in the late sixties and seventies. Such abrasive literary styles gained a new legitimacy with the cultish popularity of the politically progressive author Nabarun Bhattacharyay, who remains a major influence on Q. See Ghosh (2011) and Bhattacharya (2010).
30. Why such paranoid narrative structures dominantly feature masculine perspectives often dabbling in misogynist or homoerotic allusions is another significant question worth pursuing in detail.
31. For ongoing work in that direction, see Chatterjee (2013).

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