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## **Heist and the City: Urban Allegory in Gangster-caper films: The Asphalt Jungle; Rififi; La Cercle Rouge; &Johnny Gaddar**

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**Abstract:** The article looks into the sub genre of the gangster film known as the Heist Film. It examines the importance and symbolism inherent within the Heist narrative in fleshing out the terrain of the city. In 1950s, stories involving a heist theme began to develop in gangster films which slowly got interpellated with the noir genre, creating a hybrid of gangster noir. A central element in these films is the undertaking of a single crime of great monetary value carried out with great mathematical precision in a given time-frame. These films with variations on the same theme of a caper or robbery present us with an alternative topography, an alternative community, and an alternative consciousness. The trope of an organised and calculated heist occurring in crime fiction and film can perhaps be seen in this light as metaphorically evoking the conditions of urban living. The narrative conceit of the genre based on an intensification of the quantified time allegories the experience in everyday life of the metropolis; the trope of the caper and heist presents an inverted view of the ordinary involvement of people in the rhythms of working life.

**Keywords:** Heist film, Film noir, Gangster noir, Production of space,mise-en-scene, Caper

### **Introduction**

“Crime is only a left-handed form of human endeavor.”

Alonzo D. Emmerich (Louis Calhern) in *The Asphalt Jungle*

The Gangster film is most readily identified as an American genre, even though earlier prototypes like the *Fantomas* series (1913-14) by Louis Feuillade existed in France. However, the socio-economic context and turn of the century discourses that gave rise to the genre of the Gangster film had their origin in America. Having its antecedents in the Hollywood silent film era, the genre blossomed with the coming of sound, and especially the three classics of the early 1930's: *Little Caesar* (1930), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) proved to be subversive in their portrayal of gangsters and bootleggers in conflict with the social norms of that time. It was a time of profound crisis and transformation in American society and the ideal of the American Dream was ravaged by a government enforced Prohibition (1919-33), during which the manufacture of alcoholic drinks was forbidden, and again by the Great Depression (1929-34) when worldwide economic collapse led to commercial redundancy and mass unemployment. The two events exposed the contradictions in the American Dream which was based on the ideals of democratic and classless society guaranteed by the constitution. The dream equated success with material wealth which now

was in the hands of the few. The proletariat, the immigrant class and ethnic minority with whom gangsters were associated, asserted their rights by stealing this 'success' from the moneyed class in a travesty of the national ideals which had contradictorily come to admire a rags-to-riches trajectory of the individual. (Munby, Jonathan 1999) The rebelliousness of the gangsters got narrativised in the popular press and films of that time and the figure of the gangster assumed a mythic iconoclastic status in American culture and history.

Unlike other central national myths, such as the cowboy and the western outlaw, the gangster was a modern urban phenomenon in conflict with the older notions of outlawry. However, the exposition of male heroics, careful planning and goal driven trajectories for their heroes, was typical of both the gangster film and the western, except in the case of the former, the fatalism inherent in the protagonist was more prominent and films often ended with the death of the gangster-hero. If the western had its own codes of the duel and ritual killing, in the 1940s and 1950s, stories involving a "heist" theme began to develop in gangster films which slowly got interpellated with the noir genre, creating a hybrid of gangster noir. Meticulously staged robberies coincided with stories of betrayal in such films like *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949) and *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak, 1949). A central element in these films is the undertaking of a single crime of great monetary value carried out with great mathematical precision in a given time-frame. *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) by John Huston, *Rififi* (1955) by Jules Dassin, *La Cercle Rouge* (1971) by Jean Pierre Melville can be chosen as examples of films (across different times and nations) revolving around a group of criminals who plan and execute a clever daring, but ultimately unsuccessful robbery involving cash or jewels. Often the criminals have a falling out, or make one fatal error that ultimately leads to their arrest or death. These films with variations on the same theme of a caper or robbery "present us with an alternative topography, an alternative community, and an alternative consciousness." (Mazumdar, Ranjani 2007) They also take us to unexplored labyrinthine interiors and dangerous streets of big cities like Los Angeles, Paris, New York, and Mumbai where the issues of conformity/non-conformity to a group/nation, interplay of individual desire and masculine heroics are played out. The displaced renderings of urban condition and the socio-economic subtext of a city and nation-it's money economy and contingency of time and chance in a metropolis get allegorised in a constant return of the gangster films to their 'primal scene'- the heist.

### **Significance Of The Study**

The significance of the select films genre lie in its ability to evoke a world of strife where normative codes of morality, legality, rationality, and identity are challenged. The narrative conceit of the genre based on an intensification of the quantified time allegorizes the experience in everyday life of the metropolis; the trope of the caper and heist presents an inverted view of the ordinary involvement of people in the rhythms of working life. The allegory extends to critique the machinery of big financial capitals and cities where a paucity of time, focus on specialisation and a fetishisation of trade and speculation has become a norm. These films will pave space to uplift the value of caper genre and a healthy communication for the production of rich wealth mediated by some modern techniques and machinery. It will help watchers and readers to understand city life dwellers.

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## **Review Of Related Studies**

Henri Lefebvre: **The Production of Space(2002)**: He carries not strictly geometrical meaning but a sort of code which allows space not only to be read but also constructed.

Nicholas Christopher- **Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City** (1997)- he analyses takes grand tour of the great film noirs where he marks that the city as labyrinth is key to entering the psychological and aesthetic framework of the film noir.

Ranjni Majumdar- **Bombay Cinema** (2007): Ranjni is meant Cinema is the best commercial industry of India that gives a powerful cultural force and means of reproduction highlighting the city Bombay that is a metaphor of experimentation of urban experience and the life of city dwellers and taking a multidisciplinary approach to understanding Bombay cinema as the unofficial archive of the city in India.

George Simmel-“ The Metropolis and Mental Life”chapter 20 **on Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings**(1971): “The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence of and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and techniques of life. This antagonism represents the most modern form of the the conflict which primitive man must carry on with nature for his own bodily experience.”

Edward Dimendburg, “Centripetal Space” chapter from his **Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity**(2004): he captures a recent critical eye of both academic and cinephiles more than film noir. He states that film noir a rich source to give a critical experience of modernity and discontents examining an intersection between the spatial and temporal dimension of noir.

## **Objectives Of The Study**

- To examine the importance and symbolism inherent within the Heist narrative.
- To frame a hybridity of gangster noir
- To understand the monetary value of crime fiction movies.
- To find out the possibility of an alternative topography, an alternative community and an alternative consciousness of caper genre.
- To Study money Economy and Adventure in Time

## **Hypotheses Of The Study**

- Awareness on gangster noir films particularising the site of the centrifugal space of a city life.
- The socio-economic context and turn of the century discourses that gave rise to the genre of the Gangster film had their origin in America.
- Highlight of a corrupt socio-technological mechanism through the narratives of the persona of antihero.

- Study the culture of city dwellers in narratives.
- The meticulous craftsmanship of human needs and desires in urban life.
- Commodification of metal life and means of reproduction to avoid commercial redundancy.

### Critical Analysis of films

#### Men at work: The Heist

What links most of the films which I will alternately refer to in the paper, is the centrality of a heist or robbery that a group of men conspire to carry out. (Women are completely missing from the scene and the plan, and if they do appear they are seen as threats, in keeping with the noir typology-the title of the French film-*Du Rififi chez les hommes* ("of brawling among men") testifies to the gangster film being a male world.) With the release of *The Asphalt Jungle* in 1950, the focus on the planning and execution of a big heist really emerged as an identifiable theme in noir films. The *Asphalt Jungle* depicts in great detail how a meticulously planned and executed jewellery robbery, followed by a combination of greed, corruption, and fate conspire to bring about the psychological disintegration of the protagonists involved. The meticulous craftsmanship apparent in the robbery plan devised by Doc Riedenschneider is symptomatic of a situation which ritualises the act of crime. The criminal activity is seen as a means to an end because all the protagonists have "human" needs and desires that have to be fulfilled. For Doc it means chasing young girls in Mexico; for Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden) the most sympathetic character of the film, it means buying back the family ranch in Kentucky; for Louis Ciavelli (Anthony Caruso) the safecracker, it means a better life for his wife and daughter; for Gus Minissi (James Whitmore) the hunchback driver, it means a way out of the gutter. In *Rififi*, Dassin expanded the safe-cracking job, which is negligible in the book by Auguste le Breton on which it is based, into a 32-minute sequence that occupies a fourth of the running time and is played entirely without dialogue or music. Here also, jewellery shop robbery at Mappin & Webb Ltd. entails a realisation for some dream on the part of the men involved: the money will help Cesar marry his two daughters (played by Dassin himself); for Mario it means living in expensive hotels with his wife; for Jo it is to support his family. An exception is Tony who can be linked to Doc Riedenschneider as a father figure of the group and to Corey (Alain Delon in *La Cercle Rouge*),-all of them come back from the prison to participate in the robbery not from their own volition but as reaction to their betrayal by their love interest. Tony finds his former girlfriend Mado, who became the lover of the gangster owner of the night-club L'Âge d'Or Louis Grutter while he was in prison, and he humiliates her, beating her sadistically and taking her jewels. Then he calls Jo and Mario and proposes a burglary of the jewellery shop. Similarly Corey in a symbolic act of violence on his girlfriend, who may have left him when he went to prison, leaves her photograph in the safe in exchange of money that he forcefully taables currencies in gangster's economy (**Vincendeau, Ginette 2001**) and perhaps symbolic of the representation of female sexuality in the gangster film.

Contrasted to this is the mobility and purposeful action characteristic of men at work at the heist. The detailed exploration of robbery, the focus on the technique and tools of break-in, confer nobility on men. The completed heist is presented as a job well done in *Rififi*, *Asphalt Jungle* and *La Cercle Rouge*, carried out with an expertise which Ginette Vincendeau calls 'a perverse vision of work' (**Vincendeau, Ginette 2001**) because we begin to admire the men for their skills so much that we

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forget that they are deploying it in a criminal activity. This is because, as Vincendeau further explains, the heist mobilises the most noble kind of work: that of the superior artisan (the masterwork and total concentration of the men involved and particularly the specialists among them, Cesar with his drilling machine in Rififi; Louis Ciavelli's dexterity in safecracking in Asphalt Jungle; Jansen's meticulous diffusion of the alarm system in La Cercle Rouge etc.). A professional collaboration and coordination forms a core element of male bonding, here. However, spectator identification and visual pleasure can also be said to derive from the fact that the heist seems to challenge and defy authority, which is at the heart of gangster narratives. When men fail, compassion and pathos are triggered-in Rififi, the hero, Tony dies as a consequence of the heist. Pathos is evoked through personal ties, articulated via the child who accompanies Tony in his last car ride to death. As a departure, in La Cercle Rouge, men have no past and family connections so emotions are eliminated and Corey, Jansen and others seem to be staging their own ritual suicides. Any escape from the consequences of a heist or the space of the city in this wake is denied to the doomed heroes. True to the nature of film noir, these idealistic dreams quickly remain unachievable ambitions as these criminals are surrounded by a society, which is as corrupt as they are.

### **Money Economy and Adventure in Time:**

In his essay 'Metropolis and Mental Life' Georg Simmel locates the metropolis as a site of money economy. The concentration of commercial activity in big cities, according to Simmel, gradually privileges a medium of exchange which pervades even the most intimate relationships. This valuation "reduces all quality and individuality to a purely qualitative level." (Simmel George 1971) As a corollary, the calculating exactness of practical life resulting from a money economy transforms "the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula." The trope of the organised and calculated heist occurring in crime fiction and film can perhaps be seen in this light as metaphorically evoking the conditions of urban living. The weighing, calculating, probing, enumerating of the scene of crime: the money, the jewellery etc. common to the gangster caper films; the spaces of gambling, counting of the loot, all testify to a mode of living that permeates everyday life in a metropolis. All relationships in these films are contingent on money: the sole organising factor. However, the banality inherent in such a proposition is revealed almost existentially (and especially in the case of Tony and Corey) when the gangsters fall short of making use of the money they so painstakingly gathered. Most of the deaths in these films occur as a consequence of a failure to dispose of the loot (in the case of jewellery to convert them into cash-La Cercle Rouge or simply safeguard the money from passing into the hands of other predators (Asphalt Jungle, Rififi).

The organised planning and precision in the pursuit of money heightens the awareness of an adventure across space and time; a wish to traverse the monotony of time. The whole act of the heist is centered on finishing it off in a stipulated time and the feeling of excitement is generated through constant close-up of watches. Commenting on the relationship between everyday life and rhythm, and the concept of social time, Henri Lefebvre shows how "everyday life is governed by abstract, quantitative time, the time of clocks and watches." (Lefebvre, Henri 2003) An institutionalised and homogenous time as a means of measuring working time subordinates all other aspects of daily life to the spatial organisation of work. As a consequence, to break away from the monotony of time, time is split and there is a struggle around time and its use. There is an increase in nighttime activity and

social practice eats into the hours of darkness. Extending the idea Lefebvre says, “Quantified time...becomes both uniform and monotonous while at the same time dispersed and fragmented. Like space, it is divided into lots of parcels: journeys (themselves fragmented), various forms of work, entertainment, leisure.”(Lefebvre, Henri 2002) The heist thus projects an intensification of the quantified time as experience in everyday life of the metropolis; the trope de-centers the ordinary involvement of people in the rhythms of working life to reintroduce it as playful and pleasurable subversive activity in dangerous interiors.

### Counter-spaces and Labyrinths

A growing permeation of social life by exchange relations and a gradual movement to the impersonal politics of Gessellschaft, yields an increasingly mediated mode of spatiality that alters traditional relations of production and connection to nature.(Dimendburg 2004)As Lefebvre says in *The Production of Space* “What runs counter to a society founded on exchange is a primacy of *use* ...When a community fights the construction of urban motorways or housing-developments, when it demands ‘amenities, or empty spaces for play and encounter, we can see how a counter-space can insert itself into spatial reality.”(Lefebvre, Henri 2002) Lefebvre refers to certain counter-spaces in the imaginary of culture that resist the dominant and institutionalised cartography of planners. (Lefebvre, Henri 2002) In his words, “certain deviant or diverted spaces, though initially subordinate, show distinct evidence of true productive capacity...Such spaces appear on the first inspection to have escaped the control of the established order, and thus, inasmuch as they are spaces of play, to constitute a vast ‘counter-space’.”(Lefebvre, Henri 2002) Such an alternative geography can be seen in the gangster narratives and the labyrinths, leisure spaces and unknown quarters that the gangsters traverse. An abstract space of an anonymous and claustrophobic city is fore grounded in *The Asphalt Jungle*. In its anonymity, the city remains unfettered from the historical associations of particular sites of memory and public spatial practices; a realm that Lefebvre calls ‘abstract space’ informs Huston’s film. This realm is dominated by technological mediations, conceptualisation, accumulation of growth and planning embodied in the trope of the ‘heist’. Throughout the film, characters negotiate labyrinthine spaces that appear like long corridors-the bookie’s joint leads to a backroom which resembles the sewer that connects the gang to the jewellery vault, which in turn echoes the jail corridor that lead to the prison cells. The gangsters planning a heist weave for themselves trajectories beyond the eye of social surveillance; they make a valiant attempt to recover uncharted spaces in “a climate of shrinking possibilities,” where the “virtuous and ethical landscape has been corroded by city filth and political graft.”(Munby, Jonathan 1999)

Nicolas Christopher, referring to the world of film noir and gangster films has pointed to the centrality of the labyrinth to understand the city in the genre:

*“The city is a labyrinth of human construction, as intricate in its steel, glass, and stone as the millions of webs of human relationships suspended within its confines. It is a projection of the human imagination, and also a reflection of its inhabitants’ inner lives; and this is a constant theme –really, a premise of film noir. In these films the framing of the city, our visual progression through the labyrinth is as significant as plot characterisation...the characters’...innermost conflicts and desires are rooted in urban claustrophobia and stasis; and they tread a shadowy borderline between repressed violence and outright vulnerability.*

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*Hence the obsessive emphasis on the urban settings that are precarious and dangerous: rooftops, walkways on bridges, railroad tracks, high windows, ledges, towering public monuments, unlit alleys and industrial zones, not to mention moving trains and cars.”*  
**(Christopher, Nicholas 1997)**

The concept of the labyrinth thus extends from physical and lived spaces of the city; the twists in the plot and stratagems, to the psychological condition of the heroes in gangster-noir.

Jean Pierre Melville's film also dialogue with the American gangster film of the 1930's to 50's. His thrillers like the *La Cercle Rouge*, *La Samourai*, *Un Flic* ( his final gangster trilogy), display the classic urban iconography of crime. The last three films inhabit the affluent areas of the Champs-Elysees where the moneyed bourgeoisie meets high class prostitution. Melville's gangsters chart out a personalised topography roaming the streets, and leisure spaces like cafes, and night clubs of Paris, Marseilles and New York. They celebrate the cars, guns and smart attire of the gangster, with his dark suits and ties, his trench coats and hats. The world of *La Cercle Rouge* is constituted by large open spaces showing the landscape of forests and fields and highways in which men are placed much like the Western; at the same time the city is presented in a minimalist fashion as bare and empty space evoking a cold, linear and modernist world. The colors of the interiors -the prison, the bedroom are washed out and dominated by greys, blues and greens. The interiority of the private apartments is equated with ailing masculinity as Jansen a retired cop, played by Yves Montand dreams of colourful lizards and snakes erupting from his wardrobe in his alcohol induced hallucination. **(Simile, George** In *La Cercle Rouge* three journeys of the hero Corey to the Santi's, the cabaret run by the eponymous character where Corey encounters women dancers dressed as prostitutes is symptomatic of the mis-en-scene of gangster noir films where nightclubs, gambling dens, speak-easies etc become the site of conspiracy, eroticised song and dance and spectacle. In his other film *La Samourai*, the trajectory of the hero Jef is so entwined with the nightclub that he stages his suicide in the club! The deviant spaces of leisure tend in Lefebvre's words shows 'a tension, a transgression of 'users' in search of a way forward, to surmount divisions: division between social and the mental, the division between the sensory and the intellectual, and also the difference between the everyday and out-of ordinary.'" **(Lefebvre, Henri 2002)** In this way the space of leisure provide a phantasmagoria of enjoyment and joy that evades everyday working life; it bridges the gap between traditional spaces with their monumentality and their localisations based on work and its demands. In *Rifici* by Dassin the dancer at the cabaret owned by Grutter -L'age D'Or mocks the machismo of the gangster by referring to his inner violence and sadism with subtle referencing of domestic violence. Tony's sadistic attack on Mado converts the space of home into a place of sadistic violence. In *Rifici*, men experience space in terms of violence, addiction (Grutter's sidekick), erotic longing ( Mario, Cesar). Initially, the camera takes us to the everyday scenes of idyllic family scene (Jo's family); the intimate spaces in Mario's house such as the bedroom and the bath; the casino of the drug smuggler Grutter. An intense experience of space comes about in the prolongation of the act of heist itself-as men divide the labor between each other in a parody of 'work ethic' in a capitalist economy. The private space of the home is ripped apart to land into the commercial zone of the jewellery shop. The cold architecture of a house in the suburb gives shelter to the criminals who kidnap Jo's child.

The violence of the city space erupts with shocking effect when a wounded Tony drives the car through the urban centre, and menacing bridges, denuded trees assume a life of their own. The parody of the figure of gangster is underscored by the child shooting nonchalantly in the air.

### **The Cinematic Gangland: Johnny Gaddar**

Bombay is all about transaction-dandia.

-Suketu Mehta, Maximum city

Our *rhythms* insert us into a vast and infinitely complex world, which imposes on us our experience and the elements of that experience. (italic mine)

- Henri Lefebvre, 'The Rhythmanalytical Project'

Johnny Gaddar (2007), a recent film by Sriram Raghavan from the Bombay film industry, does not involve a heist *per se*, but deals with a group of men trying to make it big and centers on a caper carried out with the same meticulous planning and organisation as in a heist. The story is about a gang headed by ex-watch smuggler Seshadri (Dharmendra), Prakash (Vinay Patak), Shardul (Zakir Hussain), Shiva (Daya Shetty) and Vikram (Neil Mukesh) - five business associates, who plan a conspiracy. All have one common interest and that is making fast money. The eldest of the group is Seshadri and he gets an offer to make a fortune in four days and the rest of the gang agree to pitch in their share as this would put them in the big league. The youngest of the group Vikram decides to double-cross the gang and elope with his love Mini (who is Shardul's wife) to Canada. A deal is struck between the gang and a corrupt Bangalore cop Kalyan who is a friend of Sheshadri, to sell a piece of 'French-furniture' which is worth five crores, to the gang in two and a half crore ( the nature of the product is kept ambiguous throughout the film but it is contraband cocaine that Kalyan confiscates from a peddler in Bangalore). The five members, on Sheshadri's suggestion contribute fifty crores each to purchase the stuff from Kalyan. Shiva, Sheshadri's strong man is assigned to collect the drug on a given day and particular time from Kalyan. However, Vikram who upon Mini's insistence wants to escape to Canada, far from the gaze of her husband Shardul, devises a plan to steal all the money of the partners and elope with it.

### **Profile of the Traitor(s)**

In a poster introducing the hero Vikram played by Neil Mukesh, his character traits are thus described: (and this is the only clue to his background, as he appears completely dissociated from his past in the film- with no family ties binding him to a single space) "His taste for fast money and fast life was first realised with huge profits he earned by speculating on stocks with other people's money. A smart and charming young man Vikram was unfazed when he was fired from work. Money is everything for him and he is willing to get it irrespective of the means." The amorality of the noir hero is evident in Vikram's construction here and he appears as a lone entrepreneur in a big city. In a conversation with Mini in a hotel, when she tells him to stop working with 'gangsters', Vikram insists that he is just doing business and that life is a gamble for him. He seems to be partially correct as the configuration of the 'gangsters' in Johnny Gaddar is not heavily coded as in gangster noir films i.e. there is no heavy investment in their dress codes, nor does the mise-en-scene convey a chiaroscuro world full of shadows and bleakness.

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In their everyday garb, the members of Sheshadri's 'gang' come across as ordinary businessmen trying to put up a scam. They also differ from the coding usual in Bombay gangster-noirs *Tezaab*, *Company*, *Satya*, *Ghulam* etc- In such an evocation of everyday world the figures of *bhai*, *dada*, *tapori* commonly associated with Bombay underworld myth and city life are missing ( the closest we come to a *dada* figure is Prakash- the gambling den owner but even he is distanced by his clear Hindustani speech and vulnerability). The narrative doesn't attempt to negotiate a large gangster syndicate as featured in films like *Company* and *Satya*- it doesn't deal with 'large unethical criminal machines' and like the gangster-caper films, tries to present an organised attempt to defy the system which is symbolic of a city centred on finance, trading and scams. The business like manoeuvres of the five men (they all come across as investors in the film) is typical of a city founded as a trading city, a city of transaction where scams are not uncommon. As Suketu Mehta says in a personalised account of Bombay in *Maximum City*:

"Bombay survives on the scam, we are all complicit. A man who has made his money through a scam is more respected than a man who has made his money through hard work, because the ethic of Bombay is quick upward mobility and a scam is a shortcut. A scam shows good business sense and a quick mind. And anyone can work hard and make money. What's to admire about that? But a well-executed scam? Now, there's a thing of beauty!"(Mehta, Suketu 2005)

All the gang members aspire to this upward mobility and all the relationships between men and between men and women are contingent on a relationship of exchange that of money economy as mentioned earlier in the context of gangster-heist films and Simmel's explication. Thus, the weighing, calculating, probing, enumerating of money assisted by telling-machines; the spaces of gambling, counting of the loot, counterfeit money and its desperate search in the interiority of homes in Johnny Gaddar, all allegorise a mode of living that permeates everyday life in a metropolis which is a centre of finance, trading and speculation.

### **Masculinity, Mobility & the Body**

The mobility which all the members of the gang aspire to be vested in the youngest of the lot- Vikram, the protagonist/traitor. Though an element of the group, he is like a stranger to it and his "membership within the group involves both being outside it and confronting it."(Simmel, George 1971) Throughout the film he is seen traveling both inside and outside the city with great agility- he is seen driving across the city, taking highways, trains, flights, jumping off balconies, killing his fellow gang members and disposing their bodies swiftly. His mobility and purposeful action is characteristic of men at work at the heist. Combined with his dissociation with a past and a family, "the appearance of (his) mobility within a bounded group occasions that synthesis of nearness and remoteness which constitutes the formal position of the stranger. The purely mobile person comes incidentally into contact with every single element but is not bound up organically, through established ties of kinship, locality, an occupation, with any single one."(Simmel, George 1971) Because of his mobility and absence of his roots, Vikram confronts the group with a distinctively 'objective attitude'- unlike Prakash and Shardul who keep bickering with each other on petty matters related to money and investment in deals, Vikram views the group as just another investment enterprise, even though Sheshadri treats him as a son and others think of him as a younger brother.

But like Simmel's stranger of the urban space, Vikram is not "bound by ties which could prejudice his perception, his understanding, and his assessment of data...his conditions are not confined by custom, piety, or precedent."(Simmel, George 1971) Perhaps, this detachment from kinship ties and male bonding explains why Vikram doesn't hesitate in betraying his friends and eliminating his group members: Shiva, Prakash, Shardul, one after another. His apathy reaches its apogee when he eliminates a father-like Sheshadri, thus fulfilling his patricidal Oedipal fantasy.

Vikram's mobility is also linked to fact of his being the youngest of the members and his intertextual construction after Dev Anand's personality in *Johnny Mera Naam*, a role noted for its edginess and vulnerability at the same time. His thin and agile body can easily break into a dance in the private space of his flat, slither through drainage pipes, slip through a busy street, and enter houses through backdoors. Compared to his body, Shiva's (whom he kills) body is like a bulky, linear monolithic block, and Sheshadri's a body confined to the spaces of home in his retired status as an ex-smuggler of watches-a body whose time has come and gone past (in this sense Dharmendra's casting, his slurry speech acts as a counterpoint to rhythms of Neil Mukesh's body.)

### **Careful Planning and Time: Rhythms of Everyday Life and Bodies**

The narcissism and self-absorption of the gangster/noir hero is evident in Vikram's judging the rhythms of other bodies from the matrix of his own self. (Throughout the film a multiplication of his personality comes across through photographs, mirrors etc). His careful planning of robbery on train is premised on making Shiva unconscious by using 'chloroform'. He times its effects on his body but the same rule does not prove to be true for Shiva as the effect of the drug takes much more time to act upon his body than Vikram had calculated. As Henri Lefebvre says extending a physiological metaphor in *The Rhythmanalytical Project*, "in this immense spectral presence we grasp and perceive only what corresponds to our own rhythms, the rhythms of our organs...Man: his physical and physiological existence is indeed the measure of the world...It is not only that our knowledge is relative to our constitution, it is that what the world that offers itself to us ( nature, the earth, the body and its role in social relations etc.) is relative to that constitution."(Lefevre, Henri 2003 When Vikram breaks down chastised by 'his father' Sheshadri, he admits to his failure to understand why the same did not apply to Shiva's body as his.

Vikram's sense of time , his ability to stage a caper in the moving train does not come from his experience of gangster codes and techniques, instead he gets to learn it from the example set by an earlier film starring Amitabh Bachhan, Parwana. His everyday experience of time is shown to be always already cinematic as he learns the tricks of the trade for an example set by a film. If "access to the culture of the underworld comes to us primarily through cinema" (Mazumdar, Ranjani 2007) and the "cinematic mise-en-scene and narrative world of these films (gangster films) provide us with clues and myths that link social space with cinematic space,"<sup>1</sup> here the understanding of the real world comes to Vikram through a cinematic imaginary. His mobility and lessons in simultaneity take off from this standpoint. His very identity becomes entwined with the cinematic space as he is re-christened Johnny after the *Johnny Mera Naam*.

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### **A mise-en-scene structure:**

Such references to other films and books are part of the mise-en-scene structure of the film. While Vikram is seen reading pulp fiction of James Hadley Chase, his girlfriend Mini reads 'The Guide' by R.K Laxman, a writer note for his narrative realism. The theme music of 70s flicks like *AMIR GARIB*, *FAKIRA* and *TRAIN*, *YAADON KI BARAAT*, *KAALICHARAN* and *JOHNNY MERA NAAM* punctuate the credit sequence of the film. Film songs of the 1970s including Rama rama ghazab hui gawa re (Jugnu) and Bachke kahan jaoge (Yakeen), Zindagi iteffaq hai, create a mood of suspense and danger associated with female sexuality in noir films. Sheshadri's (Dharmendra's) dead wife sings 'Mora gora ang' from Roy's *Bandini* on the tape which also cross-references the film *Anand* by Hrishikesh Mukherji in its use of recorded sound played after death of Rajesh Khanna. Dharmendra's connection with that era of filmmaking only doubles the nostalgic tribute to cinema which sweeps through the film. Most of the characters in the film are engaged in listening, watching and reading of cultural texts- Prakash and his wife have a discussion about the stardom, luck and the body of Amitabh Bacchan in their bedroom; Shardul is shown engaged in a voyeuristic profiling of women for his dance-bar; the access to the memory of his wife for Sheshadri is dependent on a song from *Bandini* by Bimal Roy; and Vikram is inspired by Amitabh Bacchhan in Jyoti Swaroop's *Parwana* to commit the robbery on the train and to move between cities.

### **Urban Iconography and spaces:**

Beside the cross referencing of the cinematic space, Johnny Gaddar takes us to a centrifugal space of a city connected to other cities by modern means of communication. Traveling on a beat in a city masked by rain, policemen make an early exit out of the scene of crime and with the striking reflection of light from a car window the narrative goes into a flashback. Vikram is seen moving across empty highways in his car to meet his girlfriend; to finish off the caper in time. The places of transit and exit-railway stations, airports and arterial roads linking Bombay to Pune are foregrounded in the film, consistent with the theme of elopement from the city. The chaos of the urban traffic is shown in swish pans and crash zooms, and there is persistent use of wide-angle lens to create more space in such places as the street, the train, the airport, etc. as the hero runs across one exit point to the other in different cities. The realistic interior of the sleeper compartment and the bathroom of the train in which Vikram plans to rob Shiva; the hammer strong sound of the train changing pitch and variation as it passes next to a platform, in the open fields, under a bridge, over a bridge, next to another running train, coming to a halt, starting all over again, evoke the mood associated with the shocks of modern transportation. Danger lurks in open spaces of the highway too -we see Vikram's car front smashed by a speeding truck; his secrets come out in the open and he is beaten badly by Kalyan on the highway.

Homes become a site of violence and intrigue. Sheshadri, for whom home is a place of nostalgia, memory and longing for his dead wife, is killed mercilessly by Vikram in the living room of his own home. Kalyan, in a fit of sadism and anger beats the innocent nurse (fiancé of Shiva) in the empty and cold interior of an apartment. Homes also become a space to hide money away from the eyes of the group-ordinary spaces such as the kitchen, a bean bags and cushions in living room are used to hide away the loot.

Leisure spaces and ‘counter spaces’ frequent in gangster film, also dot the city in Johnny Gaddar. Prakash is the owner of a gambling den where the gangsters meet and illicit transaction happens; Shardul owns a plush nightclub where the steel, chrome and neon lights of the architecture create a seductive world. The club with a symbolic neon key hanging from its gate becomes a place for an eroticised spectacle and dance. Shardul’s death here is inextricably linked with the betrayal of his wife and underscores the dangerous sexuality associated with women in noir films. Hotels provide an intimate space for Vikram and Mini away from the gaze of society; it is at a hotel that Vikram acquires his new identity as Johnny G; it is the club where one error in decision proves to be fatal for Vikram and he is shot by Prakash’s wife mistaking him for Shardul.

## Conclusion

In all, the city of Johnny Gaddar is a city where everything is seen through the prism of transaction; where every relationship is mediated through exchange and violence, and like other gangster noir films it is a city where the possibility of love and the desire to escape the city for some idyllic place is thwarted. The male protagonist, despite his expertise and mobility; his organised attempt to defy the system and chart out a personal cartography is bound to fail in a tragic end. During his fated trajectory toward death, the city is exposed as a labyrinth dotted with spaces unknown to the eye of surveillance and urban dwellers alike. In the context of the modern city, crime narratives, as we see in the aforementioned films, seek to redraw the established rules that govern our everyday existence by revealing a world full of political graft, police brutality, and inept judicial systems, and by putting up to fore an individual’s valiant attempt not to be swallowed up by a corrupt socio-technological mechanism. As Ranjani Mazumdar says, “the significance of the gangster genre lies in its ability to evoke a world of strife where normative codes of morality, legality, rationality, and identity are challenged.”<sup>ii</sup> The narrative conceit of the genre based on an intensification of the quantified time allegorizes the experience in everyday life of the metropolis; the trope of the caper and heist presents an inverted view of the ordinary involvement of people in the rhythms of working life. The allegory extends to critique the machinery of big financial capitals and cities where a paucity of time, focus on specialisation and a fetishisation of trade and speculation has become a norm.

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