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What is This?
A new urban type:
Gangsters, terrorists, global cities

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Abstract
This article examines the concept of urban charisma as a quality that circulates through urban imaginaries and in the gestures and practices of everyday urban figures. Specifically exploring the figure of the gangster in Bombay cinema in the context of recent events of militant attacks in Mumbai, and tracing the empirical and cinematic transformation of the gangster into terrorist, this article argues that the cultural biographies of these figures, available through cinema, fiction, non-fiction writing and other forms of mass media are instructive as ‘reading principles’ through which chaotic and transitional urban spaces acquire legibility in popular imagination. As the city mutates rapidly, the mythic figure of the gangster and the enigmatic figure of the ordinary citizen-terrorist take on a new significance for understanding urban transformation precisely because these figures are framed by and in turn enframe these shifts most visibly, as these transformations become part of urban soul.

Keywords
cinematic city, globalization, instrumental action, morality, urban charisma, urban space

A new urban type
The study of the modern city has been well served by numerous figures – at once empirical and analytic types. Flaneurs, detectives, dandies, collectors and gamblers, among others are treated in the literature as special, embodying, most visibly, that elusive knowledge that is seen to suffuse urban experience. If the concept of charisma might be extended to the city, as Thomas Hansen and Oskar Verkaaij suggest in their editorial introduction to a special issue of this journal on ‘Urban Charisma’, these are figures, who, ‘like their gestures, are informed by and suffused with that elusive spirit of the city, or the neighbourhood, itself” (2009: 6) Hansen

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and Verkaaik are interested in the durability of the mythologies of particular cities even in the face of the contradictions between these mythologies by actual events and experiences. These mythologies constitute a ‘fantasmic city, whose symbolic weight and presence imbues everything occurring in the actual urban space, however banal and unexceptional, with a special significance’ (2009: 6).

This symbolic weight is an aspect of what they call ‘urban charisma’, both the ‘charisma of a city as in its “soul” or mythology that is emitted from its buildings, infrastructure, the historicity of its sites and its anonymous crowds’ (2009: 6). They thus extend the ‘vaguely magical power of presence, style, seduction and performance’ associated with the sociological concept of charisma from certain individuals to urban spaces or assemblages of people, objects, infrastructures and forms. In turn, this urban ‘soul’ is also ‘potentially imbricated in the most mundane activities in the street’, embodied in the actions of certain individuals who become charismatic ‘by virtue of their actions and the knowledge and resources in the city they are rumoured to command’ (2009: 6).

Hansen and Verkaaik assert that these individuals, ‘like their gestures, are suffused with that elusive spirit of the city, or the neighbourhood, itself’ (2009: 6). In the case of Bombay, now known as Mumbai, a rich textual and cinematic tradition emphasizes the figure of the gangster – known as Bhai or Dada (both meaning ‘elder brother’) as that quintessential figure embodying urban charisma. This article takes Hansen and Verkaaik’s particular interpretation of urban charisma as a point of departure in considering the emergence of the gangster as a new analytic figure through which numerous scholars are now approaching the study of a rapidly transforming city. Although the Bhai has been a well-known figure in the mythos of Mumbai, I argue that the treatment of the gangster as an analytic figure is quite recent, and examining the developing analytic frame provides an interesting ethnographic lens into the recent history of Mumbai.

In a recent essay titled The Hit Man’s Dilemma (2005), anthropologist Keith Hart re-reads modern social theory through the lens of the gangster, specifically as portrayed in the film Company (dir. Ram Gopal Varma, 2002). Ravi Vasudevan (2000, 2001, 2004) and Ranjani Mazumdar’s (2002, 2007) work on Bombay cinema similarly makes the case for the analytic possibilities of focusing on the gangster as a cinematic and sociological figure. In this article, I will try to extend these readings by looking at a particular moment in Bombay’s recent history, beginning after the devastating riots of 1992–3 and the serial bomb blasts of March 1993, which involved the Bombay underworld as its protagonist.

At this historical moment, I argue that there has been a shift in the economy of violence in which the city is enmeshed, and by which an imagination of the city is produced for its residents and disseminated beyond Bombay. The transformation of the gangster into terrorist, and the emergence of ‘jihadist’ practices like serial bombing as a mode of using and apprehending the city are key, and this article unpacks the implications of this shift, by looking at some recent Bombay films as well as literature. I argue that this shift is important to attend to as a key symbolic event in reading the emergence of Mumbai into the contemporary cultural and
political economies of globalization. To do so, it is necessary also to think this shift in relation to Bombay’s exceptional history as a city weighed down or freed, as the case might be, by its own mythological positioning, especially in cinema and literature but also in the proliferation of ‘Bombay style’ to the far corners of the colonial world of the British Empire, and even to the global dissemination of the name itself as a sign of the ‘modern’ during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Traced through the figures of the gangster and the terrorist, Bombay’s transformation can be marked as one from its being a ‘city of risk’ in the early 20th century – of speculation and entrepreneurial spirit – to a ‘city at risk’ by the late 20th century, marked by spectacular violence as well as by the quotidian violence against the poor and the ethos of demolition through which space is reclaimed for the bourgeois projects and phantasmagorias of the global era (see Rao, 2006). These shifts in the everyday mythologies of the city, in other words, speak to the broader canvas of global transformations, the realignments of authority and sovereignty, and the recalibration of space to reflect these realignments.

Black Friday

The riots all over India following the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992 are well chronicled, but especially so in the case of Bombay. Many writers, who began to treat Bombay as a serious subject of research after these riots, argue that the city, whose name was changed to Mumbai in 1996, underwent a psychic transformation. The riots have been treated as a sign of the decline of a modern ethos itself and these events were seen to have posed a threat to the fragile, postcolonial cosmopolitanism of India. Prior to this moment, there was certainly an analytic literature on Bombay, but Bombay was considered an exception to the national condition in ways that even other cities like Delhi or Calcutta were not. As a colonial city, Bombay embodied the risks of mixing, speculation and entrepreneurship that were frowned upon during the anti-colonial period but that also gave it a special quality of ‘cityness’. Saskia Sassen defines ‘cityness’ as ‘a concept that encompasses innumerable types of urbanity, including, indeed, an intersection of differences that actually produces something new; whether good or bad, this intersection is consequential’ (2008). Its excessive ‘cityness’, one might argue, set Bombay apart from the rest of the nation, even as cities themselves were uncomfortable historical subjects in the production of the national story (see Chatterjee, 2004; Prakash, 2001).

Post-Babri riots brought Bombay into the fold of the nation in a violent way. As Appadurai (2000) has argued, they were events that ‘downloaded’ a nationalist frame of relations onto the body of the city. According to him, this caused a severe disturbance in the economy of Bombay’s very particular cosmopolitanism, one built on the already precarious relations of trust connected to the circulation of ‘cash’ or unregulated, illegal capital. The gangster, of course, was a key figure in this ‘cosmopolis of cash’, an unstable world marked by illegal circulations and by the violence required to maintain those circulations and keep them flowing.
The political implications of this gangster-driven economy of relations is clear from the numerous films, especially from the 1970s onwards, in which the nexus between the politician and the *dada* (later the *bhai*) is revealed. As Vasudevan (2001) points out, the city – specifically Bombay – becomes the subject of a pedagogy of the real in moments of serious political crisis at the national level. The riots of 1992–3 are revealing moments in this story because they brought that intersection of violence and politics to an open confrontation, etched onto burning and cut bodies, sieges of Muslim neighbourhoods and the spread of fear throughout the city.

These events famously paved the way for the rise of the Shiv Sena, the xenophobic and racist political party established in the late 1960s, which captured both the city and the State governments and renamed the city Mumbai after the riots. But a story that remained buried was the story of the serial bomb blasts that followed two months after the riots of 1992–3, in March 1993. The blasts, which were revealed to be the work of Muslim gangsters, severely fractured the underworld city, becoming the most cited cause for the gang wars of the 1990s and the ‘encounter killings’ (extra-judicial murders) that were unleashed by the police on gang members. This period is documented in detail by Suketu Mehta in *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004). Mehta was doing research for the book, which only came out in 2004, during this period and hence concentrates on events that already look dated a decade later. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Shiv Sena is in severe disarray. Since 2004, there has been constant talk of transforming Mumbai into Shanghai with the discursive and visual domination of the middle class civil society over the city. Some examples of this domination include the construction boom and the demonization and closure of the dance bars that Suketu Mehta spends so much time over and, above all, the general marginalization of the gangster culture that seemed to have dominated the city only a decade ago. This period also witnesses an increase in terrorist attacks on the city bearing a global signature – sudden attacks in public places without regard for specific targets, of which the serial bombings of July 2006 on commuter trains are the most significant, coming around the same time as similar attacks in Madrid and London. The first of these terror events in Bombay is one that has become known recently by the name *Black Friday*, after a book of the same name by the Mumbai-based investigative journalist Hussain Zaidi published in 2002, that is, nearly a decade after the blasts.

Zaidi’s book is a chronicle of the police investigations that followed the serial bombings on 12 March 1993 when ten bombs went off in quick succession at various geographically dispersed locations in the city, starting with a bomb planted in a car parked in the basement of the historic Bombay Stock Exchange building, a prime symbolic target not only for Bombay but for the nation as a whole. This was followed, with ‘metronomic precision’ by bombs that went off at intervals of 15 minutes to half an hour at the Air India building and the Regional Passport Office (both also highly visible, iconic buildings and public places) and in crowded markets, movie theatres, slums and the airport, as well as in front of the party headquarters of the Shiv Sena. In the space of two hours, practically all sites of public
life – markets, theatres, political parties and public institutions had been attacked, at least by the symbolic destruction of the buildings in which they were housed. The message was conveyed through the brutal destruction, not only of property but also lives – more than 200 people died and several hundreds were injured, to date the highest number of victims claimed by similar but much smaller-scale attacks Mumbai and Delhi (including the train bombs of July 2006 and, the more recent commando-style attacks of November 2008). Before Zaidi’s book, there is no comprehensive account of the serial blasts, which is surprising because Zaidi states that this is the first time in the world that an entire city had been thus attacked.

The city, already familiar with the devastation wrought by the post-Babri communal riots, was reeling under the unfamiliar nature of the attacks and puzzled by the modus operandi of the perpetrators. Bombay’s police commissioner declared that the blasts were a ‘proxy war’ and that the city resembled a battlefield, since the explosives used were of such high impact that they had previously only been seen on battlefields. The unfamiliarity of the situation, however, eased a few weeks later as it was revealed that the perpetrators were connected to the family of Mustaq (Tiger) Memon, a fairly well-known gangster with connections to Dawood Ibrahim, the notorious crime boss of the D-Company (so named after him), who had relocated to Dubai during the 1980s and controlled crime in the city at a distance. But this led, in turn, to intense speculation about the reasons for the underworld’s involvement, to the point of endangering their ‘business’, the extremely lucrative raison d’etre for their existence. In the following section, I discuss in some detail the ambivalent positioning of the gangster, through an analysis of cinema and through fiction and non-fiction works on Bombay or set in Bombay, including Black Friday: The True Story of the Bombay Blasts by S. Hussain Zaidi (2002), Maximum City by Suketu Mehta (2004), Shantaram by Gregory David Roberts (2004) and, most recently, Sacred Games by Vikram Chandra (2006). Although I only discuss the films and Zaidi’s book in detail, I flag these other works for the reader to make clear the continued and seemingly incessant reiteration of Bombay as the land of cops and robbers, gangsters, pirates, thieves and dancing girls.

**Improbable suspects: from crime to terror**

As pointed out earlier, in the landscape of Bombay cinema the figure of the gangster has been central as a comment on the political condition of the nation, not just on the immorality and dangers of the city. In films such as Nayakan (1995, dir. Mani Ratnam), Parinda (1989, dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra) and Satya (2002, dir. Ram Gopal Varma) we see different shades of the politician–gangster relation as each serves as doppelganger for the other. But these films must be distinguished from the films of an earlier period in which the gangster (often played by the superstar Amitabh Bachchan) was idealized in a different sense – not so much through his connections with the landscape of populist politics but through his place in the pre-liberalization, import-substitution economy. The figure of the
gangster in films like Deewar (1975, dir. Yash Chopra) is identified with the smuggler, the proponent of free-trade and the pirate. Of course, the turn to crime of a primarily economic nature was not without its moral and political undertones, accusatory toward the failure of the nation to provide bright young men with opportunities, turning them into ‘angry young men’. These films too must be regarded as being deeply connected to the trajectory of violence and populist politics, which underwrote the rise of the Shiv Sena and similar political organizations.

But the smuggler was also a figure deeply connected to the dreamworld of the metropolis, fuelled by flows of cash and goods – especially gold, cigarettes, alcohol, electronic goods, wristwatches, cosmetics and Western clothing – which is very much in evidence in the lifestyles of the underworld figures depicted in the smuggler films of the 1970s and 1980s. The character of Vijay in Deewar, played by Amitabh Bacchan, turns to a life of crime after being marginalized by the brutal realities of the city. He goes on to become a legendary smuggler, a figure integral to facilitating access to modern, cosmopolitan or westernized lifestyles and to cash, countering the frugal self-sacrificing ethos of national subject-formation with the excess and decadence of a consumerist and self-centered ethos. The audience identification with the criminal type as heroic, in Deewar, leads to a contradiction between redemption and tragedy in which the heroic citizen is trapped, making the wrong moral choices.

Like many of the most successful films of this period, Deewar consciously deploys a melodramatic and sentimental reading of the ‘angry young man’ against the backdrop of the real dramas of Bombay’s underworld. Deewar itself was closely based on the story of Haji Mastaan, a legendary figure of the Bombay underworld who was a well-known smuggler. Mastaan’s mantle was passed on to Dawood Ibrahim, the son of a police constable, who grew up in economically depressed circumstances in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in south Bombay. Beginning in a small way by stealing and extorting money from small-time traders in the 1970s, Dawood built up a crime syndicate that become known as the D-Company. Dawood’s rise in the Bombay underworld was marked by the ruthless elimination of challengers and opponents, and the gradual taking control of a flourishing smuggling syndicate formed by forging alliances with gangsters in various parts of Bombay, well beyond the confines of his own neighbourhood in South Bombay. Significantly, the D-Company’s empire was built up remotely, after Dawood relocated to Dubai in 1984 in order to avoid going in and out of jail, and to escape trial by the law in numerous murder cases against him. A figure like Mustaq Memon, popularly known as ‘Tiger’ Memon, who was to be directly implicated in the Bombay blasts, also comes from a similar background, rising from a state of penury to success through criminal activities, particularly smuggling under the guise of ‘business’.

But to return to film, it needs to be underlined that the relation between crime and cinema is both imaginative and empirical. That the story of Deewar was based on a real-life figure or that of Nayakan was based on the story of Varadarajan Mudaliar was open knowledge. Moreover, the shift away from smuggling as a
primary activity after the liberalization of the Indian economy is also significant, in that criminal gangs have become deeply implicated in the new, development industries in the city, including the financing of high-budget films, real-estate speculation and real-estate development itself. Throughout the 1990s, Mumbai’s land ownership laws were being altered in a piecemeal fashion by politicians, apparently leaving intact older restrictions – like limits on building heights and ceilings on the amounts of land that could be owned by individuals, as well as the famously draconian rent-control laws which froze rents at 1947 rates (when the laws were enacted to prevent extortion of high rents during post-war housing shortages) – while altering them from within by enacting exceptions.

The tentative opening up of the land market in this period to allow for new gated community-type developments and additional high-rises were seized by gangs as an arena for laundering cash and gaining respectability as ‘builders’, or for extorting protection money from builders in exchange for allowing them to complete projects. Slum redevelopment and rehabilitation, which became increasingly important to political success, were also similarly encroached upon by gangs. Finally, extortion of protection money from the film industry and the financing of high-budget films by gangsters also became rampant and several assassinations of well-known film personalities took place in broad daylight during the 1990s.

Within this landscape of ‘business’, gangs had increasingly begun to resemble firms, as Hart (2005) points out. In Hart’s analysis, the firm as an organization is built on reproducing the fundamentally impersonal conditions under which social life has to be produced by specific, socially marked persons, thus raising questions about the morality of instrumental action. Dawood’s gang was popularly referred to as the D-Company, for example. Thus, the news that some of these ‘company men’, rather the usually suspected ‘foreign hand’ (the ubiquitous euphemistic reference to Pakistan’s role in India’s domestic violence), had been involved in the blasts came as something of a surprise. Although the involvement of gangs is widely suspected in incidents of communal riots, and the assumption is that they participate in riots at least minimally as members of particular religious communities, their involvement in terrorist events like the Black Friday blasts did shatter some assumptions about the motives of actors and the imagined spaces of belonging. As I suggested above, the cinematic might be more than a mere lens – it may also serve as a specific way of engaging with the city. Rather than thinking of the cinematic as merely a lens, then, I will treat it here as a perceptual technology, one through which these ‘action figures’, especially the gangsters of Mumbai, domesticated an increasingly complex urban reality, characterized by the simultaneity of interacting and contrasting incidents within an interconnected space.

Thus, the tragic-heroic figure of the smuggler in the 1970s films conditioned a response to gang business as business where violence is limited to and seen as arising from rivalries over ‘business’. In the post-riots situation, this compact was broken, with even gangs identifying themselves openly along ethnic and religious lines. Yet, for several years after Black Friday, the blasts were neither portrayed nor mentioned in films or, for that matter in public discourse more
generally. There were no memorials to the victims nor commemorations of the event, for the city was unable perhaps to arrive at a unified vision of the event, persistently dogged by the fear of being attacked from within. Instead, a new type of film emerged, which explicitly explored the transformation of the city and the gang without mentioning its cause. The complex connections between violence and the city, a key register of action for rendering the city legible, was thus being conveyed by cinema without making it visible. This ‘legibility without visibility’ is an ambiguous product of the numerous intersections between cinema, the city, violence and the political sphere, and the ambivalent positioning of the gangster in the post-riots and post-blasts cinema of Bombay, as well as in the recent works of fiction and journalistic non-fiction writings on Bombay which provide us with a sense of this complex of perceptual technologies and the allegorical figures who interpret and move through this landscape, harnessing the power of the city.

Cops and robbers, riots and blasts

The blasts’ case was ‘solved’ fairly quickly by the Bombay police with the discovery of registration papers in an abandoned vehicle filled with the explosive RDX, which was to be used to bomb the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) building. The mission to bomb the BMC building was aborted and the van was abandoned close to the Passport Office, where one of the worst blasts had taken place. The registration papers were in the name of a close relative of the well-known underworld figure, Mustaq ‘Tiger’ Memon and the confession of Memon’s accountant after his arrest led to the gradual revelation of the extent to which Memon’s gang, affiliated to the D-Company, had been involved. The blasts were the product of a complex operation involving nearly 200 men and several different processes, including the training of the bombers, the landing of the RDX with the connivance of customs officials, its warehousing in the peripheral suburbs of Bombay, its packing and finally its dispatch to sites chosen beforehand by Memon and his fellow conspirators.

Memon and his family left Bombay supposedly for Dubai early on the morning of 12 March 1993, the day on which the bombs were set off. The incompetence of the gangsters thus led to their quick arrest and arraignment under the draconian TADA (Terrorism and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act), which allowed the accused to be held in custody without trial for long periods. One hundred and eighty nine people were arrested and charge-sheeted in what became known as the blasts’ conspiracy case. After several delays, the trial finally entered its sentencing phase in September 2006, with the last of the accused receiving their sentences in August 2007. It is perhaps the longest criminal case in history.

A key moment in Hussain Zaidi’s book Black Friday is his account of the court case. Initially, the accused were charged with sedition and waging war against the country. These charges were subsequently dropped when a lawyer for the defense convinced the judges that the accused had perpetrated the crime not as an anti-national act but as an expression of the rage and violent passion of the minority
community, and thus could not be viewed as anti-national. Besides, he argued, though many of these particular men had previous criminal records, none of them had been arrested for any anti-national acts, making a distinction between different orders of crime. This argument gestures toward the routinized place of crime specifically in the landscape of Bombay. For while the abstraction of violence in the form of terror attacks is indeed a radical departure from an earlier, performative economy of violence, it is clear from these accounts of Black Friday that it was not viewed as a form of violence coming from a radically transformed and ambiguous moral ‘outside’, which renders the nature of the ‘inside’ uncertain and unimaginable.

Much of the public discourse around the blasts was mediated through this case and through the attention showered on the case when a prominent film star, Sanjay Dutt, the son of a Hindu father (then a well known Congress politician) and a Muslim mother, was accused of taking part in the conspiracy and held in custody for more than two years. His arrest created sensation and drama, and underlined, in a surreal way, the manner in which cinema made the city and its politics legible to a vast majority of people. Shifting into the realm of cinema proper, I would like to discuss two films, which, on my reading, reflect in very different ways upon the culture of the city in the wake of the riots and the blasts. In my view, they set the tone for the understanding of a new moral universe developing in the city, which becomes more clearly visible in the last five years, marked by more open and bolder terrorist strikes than those perpetrated on Black Friday.

The first of these, Company, which was released in 2002, was directed by Ram Gopal Varma, already well known for his successful gangster movie Satya, whose protagonist was a solo character, an unknown migrant who melds into the city by making connections through criminal networks. Satya’s take on the city, as Ravi Vasudevan explains (2004), is one of a generic universe, in which the protagonist has to prove his credentials in order to develop a network to draw upon. In Company, on the other hand, the protagonists belong to the universe of the company, their interpersonal relations are tested against the instrumental rationality of the firm’s profit motives. The theme of friendship and camaraderie, so central to gangster films, is subsumed by the universe of the company, which shares a continuum of conduct with the ‘normal’ middle-class worlds of business, law, bureaucracy and instrumental action (see Hart, 2005). The film’s plot revolves around the growing reality of gang warfare in the Bombay underworld that had been developing throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The D-Company, for instance, arose in the context of a power vacuum created by the retirement of the older generations of dons, but had to consolidate its empire through the elimination of all rivals. The instability of the system ultimately led to the estrangement of the company’s head, Dawood Ibrahim, and Chota Rajan, his right-hand man. But this estrangement took on an explicitly communal dimension after the blasts and was played up in the media as the rivalry between a Muslim don who chose his Muslim lieutenant over a Hindu one. The story of Company is in fact the story of this internecine rivalry and in this sense, I would argue, it should be read as a post-blasts film.
The ostensible subject of the film – the political crisis within the gang, or the Company of the title – is at least obliquely a reference to this particular story. Because it is, in other words, about an internecine conflict, rather than about the earlier phase of rivalries between gangs which resulted in the rise of Dawood Ibrahim’s company. What is interesting is its setting in post-liberalization Bombay, where the migration of the protagonists to other locations takes on a different meaning, signaling the interpellation of Bombay into a networked crime-city that is globally dispersed into different locations. Now, as the voice-over in an important scene informs us, the telephone had become a weapon of choice as orders delivered remotely via mobile phones mediate intimate, face-to-face encounters between killer and victim. However, despite the clue delivered in its title, Company does not make any overt references to either the specific split within the D-Company nor to the communalization of relations between gangs and not even to the blasts, proceeding as if the world of crime was not, in any way, affected by the blasts. For the ‘truth’ or the reality of the blasts is perhaps impossible to acknowledge within the conventions of the popular film, and in this sense defines the limits of realism as a moral and aesthetic convention.

Black Friday: The city inside out

Black Friday (2007, dir. Anurag Kashyap), the film based on Hussain Zaidi’s book, however, attempts to push these limits while maintaining its conventional affiliations to the popular crime film genre. The film is the first attempt to constitute a cinematic public for the Bombay blasts of 1993. Prior to Black Friday, the film Bombay (1995, dir. Mani Ratnam), is considered one of the most serious attempts of popular cinema to engage with what happened in Bombay in 1992–3. The film, which is about the romance between a Hindu journalist living in Bombay and a Muslim girl from his village in southern India uses documentary footage of the riots to signal the ‘reality’ of the backdrop against which the film is constructed. In some senses, Black Friday should be considered a counterpoint to this landmark film, as it attempts to constitute a public for the blasts in a similar fashion to Bombay, embedding a deeply moral narrative into a ‘news’ story, thereby making possible the construction of a story around horrific and ultimately barbaric events.

As an adaptation, Black Friday remains faithful to the narrative structure and flow of scenes in Zaidi’s book. A press release for the film calls the blasts ‘an event that re-shaped the socio-political fabric of the city’. The narrative is mainly divided between two points of view, that of police officer Rakesh Maria, the vital police point man in the blast investigations, and that of Badshah Khan, one of the accused bombers who turned state’s approver (i.e. cooperated with the police) when in custody. The film’s narrative stops at the point at which the investigations end and the conspiracy is established. The book and the film both straddle the space between a juridically faithful narrative and a rhetorical/dramatic one.

The film tells the story from an entirely alienated point of view, even when the events are being narrated by Badshah Khan, the accused speaking from his own
subjective experience of attempting to escape arrest in the days following the blasts, or his gradual realization of the scale of his crime. Early scenes show a dramatic recreation of the blast at the Bombay Stock Exchange building (the first bomb to go off) filmed with hidden cameras to capture the ‘natural’ feel of the sites. The film proceeds in the manner of a typical crime thriller, focusing on the unfolding investigations. If *Company* is able to entirely submerge the ‘true’ backdrop of the crisis in gangland and consequently in the space of the city, *Black Friday* is focused entirely on the blasts, without any reference to the internecine gang wars or the everyday fate of the city in the wake of the blasts. Each work tells a partial story, glued together by the life and times of the city itself, which partially enters the frame of these films.

*Company* delineates a crisis in the spatial imagination of the city. The dispersal of the protagonists to Hong Kong and to Kenya seems to ignite a new form of violence – violence as interrogation – that seeks to emplace and understand the global transformations which, in turn, enable crime to focus on the city from a distance. Bird’s-eye views of the emerging city of high-rise towers financed by dubious global transactions are supplemented by a soundscape of mobile phones connecting to Mumbai’s landlines, emphasizing simultaneously the dispersal and connectivity of the city to its sister sites elsewhere. In this context, violence rained on the streets of the city by orders issued from a distant elsewhere is still clearly an attempt to territorialize the city and to contain it within the known geography of intra-city territories controlled by rival gangs.

On the other hand, in *Black Friday*, where the blasts fill up the myopic lens of camera, the transition from crime to terror is made visible but is still incomprehensible. In an interview after the completion of the film, the director Anurag Kashyap explains the film’s construction as a period piece set in pre-liberalization Bombay. In order to cut off the ubiquitous hoardings for post-liberalization brands like the now proliferating mobile phone billboards and other signs such as those for imported cars, the camera ‘had to go wide to bring in the city...[with] lots of top angles and straight shots’ (*Black Friday is a bigger film than me*, 2004). This explains to some extent the dread that the viewer experiences in the framing of the city. The city is here engaged from the point of view of the targets of the blasts, as well as from the point of view of the hiding places and routes of escape of the perpetrators. Through these devices, the city is conceived and consumed as a target, a space of dread and anticipated violence. This framing, to some extent, overdetermines the reading of the characters, even though the director expresses the intention of remaining neutral and suspending judgment. In another interview, Kashyap reveals that he read the book because he ‘truly wondered what drove people to commit such heinous acts’. But, he says, he ‘also stopped being judgmental’ (*Black Friday is a bigger film than me*, 2004).

Equally significant is the fact that the gaze of the camera, ostensibly directed by the need to blot out signs of a post-globalization Mumbai, presents a closed reading of the city that almost seems to desire a geographically foreclosed understanding of territory. By contrast, the opening sequence of *Company* views Bombay, now officially renamed Mumbai, from the position of a bird of prey circling over the new
high-rise towers of the rapidly developing suburbs in the zones north of the historic island city. A voice-over explains the contemporary situation of fear and violence in the city. The scene specifically conveys the city’s encirclement by the forces of evil and violence, and indeed its spatial imagination and circumscription as a result of this encirclement. A sociological picture of the city is rapidly conveyed through this bird’s-eye view – even if it is a bird of prey (which instantly creates identification between the viewer and the film’s gangster protagonists) – it is, as Ackbar Abbas (1994) writes, a view of the ‘city from the point of view of its architecture’.

About an hour into the film, when the gang wars are fully in evidence and the protagonists have fled the city, the director advances the narrative with another scene from a bird’s-eye view. This time, the camera is supplemented with the ringing of telephones that convey long-distance commands; the voice-over explains that the telephone had now become the weapon of choice in a war on the ground, which is conveyed only through menacing takes of the city from the ground up. In this scene, the earlier position of imagining the city from the point of view of its architecture is reversed into a view of architecture from the point of view of the city, specifically, a spatially fragmented and dispersed city. 

Company acknowledges the dispersal and the globalization of the city in the delocalization of criminal gangs and the new forms of circumscribing the city as a space of depersonalized violence, commanded from a distance. Yet this violence appears to have nothing to do with the geographies of identity within the city. Black Friday on the other hand, attempts to provide a reading of the city that is as local and as closed as possible, creating a coherent sense of the inner world of the city, its tensions and rifts writ large in the framing of its actors and in its framing of the city. It seems significant to unpack the philosophical consequences of this framing.

By choosing neither to delve into the psyches of the criminal or the terrorist nor to follow the more public drama of the involvement of a famous film star in the blasts, the film Black Friday pursues action through the personality of the city itself, reduced to a visual sign where the cultural hold of cinema and that of the underworld are condensed and alluded to in the most oblique fashion. The film ends with a documentary-realist meditation on the riots and the blasts, choosing, eventually, to rest on an objective, journalistic stance. This overdetermined reading leads not to a clear demarcation of the lines between the figures of the criminal and that of the terrorist – which is to say, engaging in the perceptual transformations of the city in which uncertainty is engaged through terror – but in fact returns to a post-riot sort of reading of Black Friday.

This is where the significance of framing the city as a spatially limited imaginary must be placed – the action does not dynamically connect inside and outside, it is rather exclusively about framing a known ‘inside’ that is attacked by ultimately unknowable forces of outsiders taking advantage of the fraternal quarrels of intimates and familiars. The oppressive gaze of the camera upon urban space as a network of places connected through the logic of terror – its targets as well as the routes of its perpetration – perhaps provides the only real clue of an outside which facilitates the entry of strangers into the moral space of the community.
At the same time, the film also manages to frame urban space as a space of communities, intimately connected yet radically estranged. The writer-director Anurag Kashyap's last word on his film is revealing: in his view, ‘Black Friday’ brings to light how an outsider can intervene, create chaos and walk away unharmed leaving a trail of destruction. It is only by looking at the past that we can understand our present (‘Black Friday is a bigger film than me’, 2004). Pinning the responsibility on the outsider, the stranger, leaves intact the moral space of the community and indeed constitutes a community as the ultimate arbiter of the limits of violence and of politics. In so doing, it walks away from acknowledging the new forms that violence has begun to assume in the post-blasts period. For acknowledging these forms of violence would force a recognition that the forms of community – moral, sentimental and imagined – as we knew them in the era of the nation-state might indeed no longer make sense, either as the intended targets or as the unintended products of terror.5

**Threats without enemies?**

*Company* and *Black Friday* constitute different ways of perceiving a city in a moment of transition. Yet each grapples with the ambivalent figure of the gangster in transition to a different ethos and moral universe. As my reading suggests, that universe is tied up to the transformation of the city itself and it is important to trace how the engagement of the gangster as a (re)newed urban type makes this emerging city legible. For if violence is a register of action that renders the city legible, then we have to ask what the kinds of violence repackaged in these cinematic narratives, whose protagonists are gangsters, tell us about the city. That legibility, of course, is itself a product of the gangster’s transformed contexts of engagement and ability to act within the sphere of the city. Elsewhere, I have argued that the bombs of *Black Friday* too perform a sort of interrogation, akin to the vivisectionist interrogation that Arjun Appadurai (2006) suggests happens during events of collective violence, when the violence against individuals and groups is perpetrated through horrific acts of disemboweling and dismembering. But the interrogation of the bomb is directed toward the space of the rapidly mutating city and situates various urban figures and types in relation to that space.

In a recent paper, Ackbar Abbas (n.d.) explores the particular ethos of the ‘generic global city’. Building on architect Rem Koolhaas’ claim, he suggests that this generic global city expresses not so much a loss of identities as a liberation from identity. The city on the make, and in the making, characterized by the incessant construction and reconstruction of the built environment, among other features, hurls its inhabitants casually into the unfamiliar. Identity loses its anchor in essence and becomes a mask that can be false – that is to say, without any hope of redemption through the discovery of its truth. The surface of the city becomes a site for the play of aliases, unmoored from an essential identity hidden in the depths of the underground – the organizational layer of technologies and infrastructure which structured the space of the city – as was thought to be the case in the early
modern city. The city formally turns into a series of mediations and experiences that no single figure, no urban type might organize or read with the clarity of x-ray vision of the detective, or the detached engagement of the flaneur, because there are no longer any hidden depths that anchor identity.

As the generic global city transforms, the ‘new’ is not the only unfamiliar terrain; the existing or the ‘old’ also mutates simultaneously and is rendered unfamiliar (see Abbas, n.d.). Anachronistic juxtapositions turn the surface of the city into a valid archaeological terrain, even though it lacks the traditional layers or depths required to practice archaeology. Residents hurled onto this slippery surface without depth must navigate, transforming themselves upon contact with the invisible, radioactive intimations emanated by this city on the make. Hacking in and out of this surface are figures like the new migrant, the speculator, the English teacher, the programming student, the pupil of American accents and manners, as well as the ordinary citizen-terrorist.

Since the Black Friday bombings, there have been several instances of serial attack on the city – in 2003, 2006 and in 2008. In the interim years, numerous other terror attacks have taken place and, in most cases, those arrested have been ordinary citizens, usually Muslim and sometimes even well-educated professionals. The shift from criminal type to terrorist has turned full circle, with the ordinary, generic, albeit minority citizen becoming the new face of terror. An episode involving Ishrat Jahan, a young Muslim college student, who was gunned down in Gujarat in June 2004, is instructive in capturing the confused public debate over the perpetrator. Ishrat, who hailed from a poor family living in Mumbra – an impoverished and predominantly Muslim town on the immediate outskirts of Mumbai – was a student at a well-known city college. She disappeared from home and was found dead, four days later, gunned down by the police along with three other men under highly suspicious circumstances. The Gujarat police claimed that two of the four were Pakistani nationals and that the foursome were on their way to assassinate Narendra Modi, the infamous chief minister of Gujarat who is widely thought to be responsible for the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. Ishrat’s killing and the subsequent public furore over her death, her funeral, which attracted massive crowds as well as local Muslim politicians, raised doubts about the identity of the enemy and the perpetrator, who was thought by her community to be a well-behaved, hard-working and generally well-adjusted young lady.

After the arrests in the July 2006 bombings in Mumbai, the following report appeared in The Hindustan Times newspaper about Faisal Sheikh, the alleged Western India commander of the jihadi group Lashkar e-Taiba, under the title ‘Changing face of the terrorist’:

Faisal Sheikh, Jihadi

1) He was 31, clean-shaven, handsome young man who spoke English as though it was his mother tongue.

2) He wore denims (sic) and travelled around town on a flashy Pulsar bike.
3) He spent the odd evening in a beer bar, and a certain bar dancer was known to keep him company. A favour she extended on occasion even during the day at his one-room terrace pad in Bandra (West). Two of Faisal Sheikh’s brothers were computer engineers: the older, Rahil, was based in London, the younger, Muzammil, worked with software giant Oracle in Bangalore.

Faisal had himself studied engineering for a couple of years, and continued to inhabit the boundaryless domain of cyberspace for many hours every day.

No one who knew Faisal Sheikh could believe it when the police charged him with bombing Mumbai on 11/7 and called him a jihadi commander of the Lashkar-e-Taiba in Western India.

One of his tribe, Faisal isn’t an exception. In fact, as jihadi profiles go, he is the prototype. All the men picked up for the 11/7 bombings were similar. Ehtesham Siddique, general secretary of the banned SIMI in Maharashtra, accused of planting the Mira Road bomb, is an engineer. Dr Tanvir Ansari, who provided logistical support, spent six years studying Unani medicine in a Nagpur medical college. Naved Khan, alleged planter of the Khar bomb, worked in a call centre in Hyderabad. And Rizwan Dawre, accused of helping to organise the travel of the jihadis who came from Pakistan, earns an impressive monthly salary as a senior software professional with an MNC in Dubai. (Sharan, 2006)7

As early as 2003, an article in *Asia Times* stated:

increasingly, the youth who are joining extremist outfits or are sympathizers of such outfits are people like us. The man behind the terrorist strike could just be the doctor in a neighbouring hospital or a student in an engineering college.

The bombs themselves were made in a one-room tenement in the suburb of Govandi, which the press described as being a crowded space with 20 people living in it, while Faisal Sheikh’s extended family lived in the distant suburb of Mira Road. These cases underline both the anxiety about the identity of the enemy as well as the new urban landscapes within which these dramas surrounding the identities of ‘anonymous’ terrorists are set. They belong to the worlds of the deprived peripheries of the city, in which the dreams and aspirations of leading middle-class lives are being pursued by marginalized groups, some of whom have been expelled from the city. The town of Mumbra, for example, is known to have grown considerably after the 1993 blasts, when many Muslims were either expelled by the violence against their persons and properties, or chose to leave Bombay voluntarily and settle in Mumbra.

In the figures of these new terrorists, the speculations about identity come full circle to confront the ordinary, everyday dreams of bourgeois life and respectability. In the stories of their families, especially, one hears echoes of these aspirations as they struggle to maintain their dignity in the face of the media onslaught and
scrutiny into the lives of their children, arrested or killed for the most heinous of crimes. These dramas of terror are no longer cinematic and larger than life, they belong to the low-brow universe of cable television, driven by a hunger for 24/7 news and stories of scandal, corruption and exposure. By contrast with cinema, these new perceptual technologies, package a universe swarming with individuals whose true identities can never be revealed, they can only exist as aliases in their engagement with the city, as the stories about the July 2006 bombers reveal. This, as Ackbar Abbas argues, is the condition of the ‘generic global city’, which is saturated with information, which is x-urban and x-colonial (rather than postcolonial), dominated by the production of fakes.

This global city is already called forth by the terrorist acts committed by gangsters, blurring the moral boundaries of the pre-existing city by transforming the economy of violence and with it the legibility of the community of the city. By moving beyond local cause and particularistic targets, these gangster-terrorists of the Black Friday bombings are also moving beyond the boundaries of a known urban universe. Their engagement with a particular form of violence, in other words, becomes a new register for knowing the city. This new register or form of knowing depends upon the abstraction of urban space in the manner of military strategists and urban planners, rather than in the manner of the resident of a particular neighbourhood or member of a particular community, even though those attributes are also present. The gangster-terrorist, however, is only the beginning of a trajectory that culminates with the emergence of a much more anonymous kind of perpetrator, one as yet unimaginable as a terrorist and one who presents a mask of innocence and ordinariness. Caught within the logic of the informational city, the new urban terrorist also partakes of new kinds of social life driven, at least in part, by the opportunities afforded by the city as a network created by and saturated with all kinds of information that must be decoded in order to operate successfully. Violence is no longer restricted to a sense of physical harm but embodied in the fear of the fatal encounter with the terrorist among us.

Ultimately, there is a recursive relationship between the representation of the urban condition specific to the global city and the ontology of the global called forth by the actions of terrorists, often exceeding their own intentions for making statements or spreading fear. If the practice of jihadi violence entails the cultivation of pity and sympathy, as Faisal Devji (2005) argues, is it possible for gangsters, inhabiting the impersonal worlds of instrumental violence, to cultivate such sympathy and pity? Turning to perceptions of the city and the kinds of perceptual technologies that make the city visible, we might be able to see more clearly the relationship between acting, perceiving and being in the city and the forms in which the city is represented. This is perhaps one value of staying with and pursuing the urban types discussed in this article both as analytic figures and as lived figures. For, caught within the apparatuses that simultaneously enable us to perceive them and make them visible to ourselves, as well as enable their perceptions and actions within the space of the city, these urban types emerge as very special kinds of figures – simultaneously self-reflecting and self-reflexive. They are perhaps the
keys to a new way of grasping the urban as a ‘kind of sociality, a mental condition but also a way of being in the world’ (Hansen and Verkaaik, 2009: 8).

Notes
1. This argument is made more carefully in my recent essay, ‘How to read a bomb: scenes from Bombay’s Black Friday’ (2007).
2. The D-Company is discussed in detail below.
3. Though the film was completed in 2004 and passed by the censors of the Film Board, the Mumbai High Court blocked its release while the trial of the blasts’ case accused was still underway. When the case entered its sentencing phase in September 2006, the film was finally cleared for release. I had the opportunity to see it at a special preview screening arranged by the director in August 2004. I thank Dr Rachel Dwyer for making this possible.
4. Suketu Mehta, whose book Maximum City, has two chapters devoted to the cops and gangsters in this gang war writes: ‘The hit men refer to the operational centres of the gangs – Karachi, Dubai, Malaysia – as upar, “above,” and Bombay as neeche, “below.”’ This geography also captures another one in which ‘the underworld is an overworld; it is somehow suspended above this world and can come down and strike any time it chooses’ (2004: 134). Mehta’s evocative descriptions have the sense of existing in real time and at the same time being hyperbolic precisely because they seem to invoke a view of reality that is completely saturated by the cinematic.
5. It would be interesting to assess this film and its effect on audiences after its release. Its popular reception would, in my view, be an interesting sign of the everyday engagement and understanding of terror on the part of the audiences. However, due to lack of space I have been unable to do so here.
6. In the attacks on the commuter trains in Mumbai on 11 July 2006, the police arrested a young Muslim man who they claim is an educated, professional youth, affiliated to the banned organization, SIMI (Students Islamic Movement of India).
7. After the event, the newspapers used 9/11-style nomenclature referring to the train blasts collectively as 11/7. The acronym MNC, popular in the Indian press denotes ‘multinational corporation’.

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**Films**


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