The Spring Thunder[1]
Revisiting the Naxal Movement in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

This article investigates why and how the Naxal movement, a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist armed revolutionary movement which emerged in May 1967 in India, has been repeatedly addressed, adapted, and accommodated in Indian cinema. As an organized political movement with specific manifesto and vision of the nature of the state, the Naxal movement attempted to disrupt and dismantle the quasi-feudal Indian social structure and an oppressive Indian state that functioned still under colonial administrative regulation, as caretaker of interests of the powerful classes. In this article, I argue that the Naxal movement helped Indian cinema to map out the history and internal architecture of political dissent in post-independence India and construct a counter-nationalist discourse. The paper aims to evaluate how the Naxal Movement serves as a resource to represent the politics of dissent in India in the 1970s in parallel cinema and as a critique of the neo-liberal policies of the Indian State in the postmillennial Bollywood films. It aims to analyse selected films that deal with the Naxal/Maoist movements in India as a counter historiography.

Introduction

The socio-political context of India between 1947 and 1970s was tremendously tumultuous, marked by several mass movements and peasant uprisings that were led by different Communist organizations. The most influential among these was the armed revolutionary movement that began in May 1967, known popularly as the Naxal movement. It closely followed the Chinese Cultural revolution

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led by Mao Zedong as its model and incorporated Marxist-Leninist principles, declaring the 1970s as 'the decade of liberation'. The Naxal movement was the culmination of other revolutionary peasant movements such as the Telangana Rebellion[3] (1946-1951) as well as the Tebhaga[4] (1946-47) that challenged and aimed to change India's quasi-feudal social structure. The 1970s was also a decade of liberation for Indian cinema. It was during this decade that the search for a film-aesthetics that was distinct from the mainstream reached its culmination. This led to the flourishing of an alternative film practice through the Indian Avant Garde and parallel cinema in subsequent decades. Such a cinematic praxis seems to have partially influenced post-millennial Bollywood[5] and indie films with political contents.

This article investigates how the Naxal movement has been repeatedly adapted and accommodated in Indian parallel cinema and Bollywood, albeit through very different approaches. Though there are other Indian mainstream film industries that produced films on the Naxal movement, they are considered 'regional' – unlike Bollywood, which is projected not only as India's 'national' cinema but also a cultural commodity in the global market broadly.[6] Despite considerable differences in aesthetics, content, funding and target audience, both parallel cinema and Bollywood share a transnational reach through festival circuits and global distribution channels respectively, unlike Indian regional cinemas. This transnational reach prompted me to compare films from these two rather antithetical film practices. In this essay, I therefore explore Indian film history through close textual and historical analysis within a Marxist framework, so as to unravel the socio-cultural impact of these films.

Chronicles of political movements aiming for social change have provided a recurring motif in film, as exemplified in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potyomkin*, 1925) and *October* (*Oktyabr'*,1928), Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (*La battaglia di Algeri*, 1966), Godards's *La Chinoise* (1967), Littin's *The Promised Land* (*La Tierra Prometida*, 1973), and Brocka's *Fight for Us* (*Orapronobis*, 1989). In the same vein, Indian parallel cinema from the 1970s on has documented the Naxal movement as a pivotal moment in post-independence India, archiving/constructing the history of the politics of dissent through cinema. As a thematic kernel, the Naxal movement helped parallel cinema to align itself to New Wave movements in different parts of the world in terms of content and aesthetics. It also helped parallel cinema trigger a

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[3] The Telangana peasants' armed struggle was a rebellion against the feudal landlords in the Telangana region of Hyderabad.

[4] The Tebhaga movement, led by the Kisan Sabha (the peasants' wing of the Communist Party of India) demanded two thirds of the harvests for the sharecroppers while a third being given to the landowning feudal lords.

[5] Here I refer to the post-1991 Mumbai mainstream Hindi film industry after it was accorded the industry status following the economic liberalization of India.

[6] *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance,* ed. by Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

transnational cinema project prior to its formal shaping as a global conceptual category. Like 'transnational cinema', Indian parallel cinema was also a response 'to the perceived insufficiencies of existing categories such as National Cinema'.[7] The Naxal movement further helped this emerging form to represent dissent in India, both in terms of political activism and the politics of subversive film practices. These filmmakers rigorously followed both forms of action, seeking to create a new cinematic language that was distinct from the mainstream. In place of mainstream narratives that revolved around individuals, parallel cinema represented 'the spirit and life breath of a whole people'.[8]

Bollywood began to depict the movement only in the late 1990s, after the decline of parallel cinema and long after the repression of the Naxal movement by the Indian state. References to Naxalism are interweaved in the plots in the mainstream and in parallel cinema in different ways. Both filmmaking practices address issues of nationalism and counter-nationalism in singular and remarkably different ways, which merit careful study.

The first part of this paper focuses on a set of texts that invoke active spectatorship by inviting critical engagement from the audience, and moreover come to serve as a repertoire of images and thematic motifs for later mainstream films on the Naxal movement. The second part examines how Bollywood films are functional to the maintenance of the state's ideological apparatus despite their radical content.[9] I restrict my argument to *The Adversary* (*Pratidwandi*, Satyajit Ray, 1970), and *Calcutta 71* (*Kolkata 71*, Mrinal Sen, 1972) from parallel cinema, as well as *Squared Formation* (*Chakravyuh*, Prakash Jha, 2012), and *Newton* (Amit Masurkar, 2017) from Bollywood.

Chronicling Revolution, Representing Dissent: Indian Parallel Cinema of the 1970s

The depiction of the Naxal movement on 'national' screen matches the emergence of the Indian parallel cinema inaugurated by Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* in 1969. There were several reasons behind the choice to represent the Naxal movement in parallel cinema narratives. Firstly, filmmakers such as Ray and Sen were deeply dissatisfied with mainstream cinema's falling (and failing) standards in terms of maturity, content, stylistic sophistication, and technique.[10]

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[7] Vijaya Devadas, 'Rethinking Transnational Cinema: The Case of Tamil Cinema', in *Senses of Cinema*, 49 (November 2006) <http://sensesofcinema.com/2006/film-history-conference-papers/transnational-tamil-cinema/> [accessed 19 October 2017].

[8] Jorge Sanjines, 'Problems of Form and Content in Revolutionary Cinema', in *New Latin American Cinema*, ed. by Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 62–70 (p. 63).

[9] For details see Madhav Prasad, 'Introduction', in *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 6-14.

[10] Satyajit Ray, 'What is Wrong with Indian Films?', in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Scott MacKenzie (Berkley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 117-120 (first publ. in *Calcutta Statesman* (1948)).

This led to the search for an alternative idiom which spoke to the international audience through form and content, yet remained uniquely Indian in its cultural representation.[11] The potential of film form inspired them to use it as a political tool to appeal to the domestic audience as well. India's prolonged history of anticolonial struggle coupled with the left political movements that sought to transform its quasi-feudal structure created a formidable intellectual class as well as proletarian contingencies who were waiting to engage in conversations about social transformations through artistic means. The parallel filmmakers simply needed to tap in to this social class to counter the pressure of commodification of film media. Besides, because 'Bengal [had] been in an increasing state of political flux' since the 1960s,[12] it became necessary to document this in cinema. By doing this they were able to establish a link between film and contemporary reality, assuming their responsibility as artists and embodying underrepresented history. In one of his interviews Mrinal Sen comments, '[t]hat was a time when there was a lot of unrest in Calcutta and I cannot just pull myself out of the atmosphere in which I grew…. That is when … I used to bring the physical reality onto the screen'.[13] It was as much a search for the idiom and form as it was for content, so as to suitably complement their film practice. The filmmakers that shared the Naxal movement's sense of desperation and urgency to transform a stagnant system found apt cinematic and stylistic content within the movement.

Secondly, the Naxal Movement — with its far-reaching consequences in Indian society, echoing the transnational revolutionary waves of the late-1960s — provided both a metaphor and a statement of alignment which was ambivalent in the case of Ray, but explicit in the case of Sen.[14] It also helped to put Indian parallel cinema in dialogue with the currents of Third Cinema in the mostly apolitical world cinema of that period. Although some critics explain the sympathetic representation of the movement on film in terms merely of an artistic infatuation of filmmakers, there is more to it than this. Parallel filmmakers sought to capture the 1970s in their films in order to embody contemporary history; this would be impossible without addressing the Naxal movement. For Mrinal Sen 'the most important purpose of cinema is political commentary and documentation'.[15] He mentions serving three mistresses while making films, 'the text (*the subject*), the medium (*the language of cinema*) and my own time'.[16] Such a political conundrum seems to have moved Ray too, who had avoided political content

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[11] Arun Kaul and Mrinal Sen, 'Manifesto of the New Cinema Movement', in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, pp. 165-168 (first publ. in *Close Up* (1968)).

[12] Indrani Majumdar, 'Postscript', in Marie Seton, *Portrait of a Director: Satyajit Ray* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003), p. 283.

[13] From *Mrinal Sen: An Era in Cinema* (Rajdeep Paul, 2016) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnZd-uNXlSk&t=629s> [accessed 9 September 2017].

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Ibidem.

[16] Mrinal Sen, *Always Being Born* (New Delhi: Stellar Publishers, 2006), p. 85 [emphasis in the original].

in his films before making *The Adversary* in 1970. The 1970s were, moreover, the decade in which India witnessed the Emergency for 21 months, between 25 June 1975 and 21 March 1977, which effectively impaired Indian democracy. It was also the epoch in which Ray 'embarked in a documentary interlude',[17] making his Calcutta Trilogy: *The Adversary*, *Company Limited* (*Seemabaddha*, 1971) and *The Middleman* (*Jana Aranya*, 1976). He used documentary footage of 'Calcutta streets and actual political demonstrations',[18] that he filmed along with ambient sound and montage to represent on screen the spirit of the time. By representing the Naxal movement, filmmakers, like Ray, chronicled their own politics of dissent and subversion while creating a cinematic counter-culture that responded to the viscerally 'Pavlovian' mainstream cinema, which either stayed away from the controversy or made highly clandestine reference to the political chaos.

The depiction of the Naxal movement and its impact on people offered these filmmakers a further opportunity to expose the Repressive State Apparatus (RSAs)[19] such as the police, government, judiciary and its different wings as well as semi-government organizations. These RSAs followed the colonial model, albeit used in post-colonial India to forge a consensual equilibrium between the ruling class and their subjects. For example, in the first interview sequence of *The Adversary*, the exchanges between the members of the interview board and Siddhartha, the protagonist, for a Government job, exposes the strong prejudice of the Indian state towards the ongoing Communist movements in different parts of the world (fig. 1). Siddhartha's opinion, referring to the Vietnam war, and the people's remarkable heroism resisting it, as the most extraordinary achievement of humanity in twentieth century over the moon-landing, makes the interviewers/authority figures visibly disturbed. Baffled by his answer, one of the interviewers asks him: 'Are you a communist?'. The interview sequences in general and this question, in particular, immediately solicit a reference to McCarthyism, the communist witch-hunt and the trial of the Hollywood ten in post-World War II America. Moreover, the interview sequences in the film resemble custodial interrogation and courtroom trials that elliptically represent the Naxal activists' plight under an oppressive regime (fig. 2). This interview/ interrogation motif recurs in other Indian films that depict the Naxal movement. Ray subtly incorporates his own critique of the nation into the narrative. When asked who the Prime Minister of Britain was at the time of independence, Siddhartha casually enquires: 'Whose independence, Sir?' (fig. 3), immediately invoking the communist slogan of the period: 'Yeh Azadi jhuta hai [This is a false independence]'.

The Naxal movement helped parallel cinema unmask the vacuity of

[17] Majumdar, p. 283.
[18] Ibidem.
[19] See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 2001).
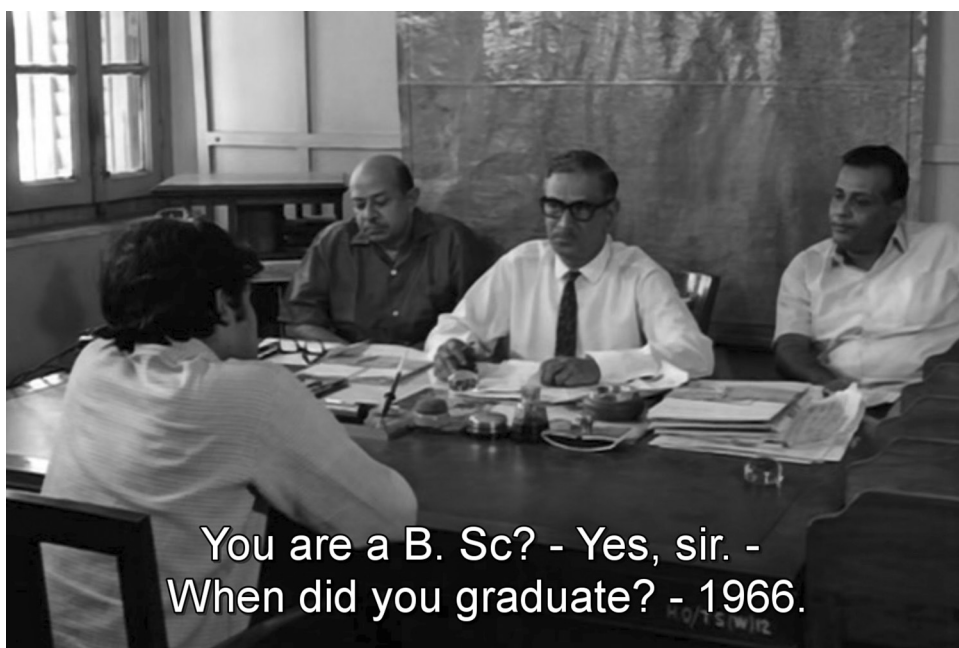
Fig. 1: Hegemonic paranoia towards revolutionary politics

Fig. 2: Job interviews elliptically represent custodial interrogations

Fig. 3: This is a false independence

development discourse by the state on one hand, and the condition of the disenfranchised populace suffering from the trauma of partition, social inequality, brutal poverty and hunger combined with unemployment, on the other. After the fateful interview, Siddhartha goes to an airconditioned theatre to avoid the scorching sun of the Calcutta road. As he enters the hall, the mandatory propaganda documentary on a five-year plan for national growth, was playing. Without paying any attention to that, he closes his eyes to take a nap. However, his siesta is ruined by a blast that references a Naxal bombing.

Mrinal Sen's Calcutta Trilogy, comprising *Interview* (1971), *Calcutta 71* (1972), and *The Guerrilla Fighter* (*Padatik*, 1973), similarly represents these concerns. There is a gradual progression in presentation of Sen's cinematic polemic in the trilogy through which he investigates the cause and effect of the angry outburst through the Naxal movement in Indian society. *Interview* foregrounds the collective disillusionment of the disenfranchised Indians about the nature of the Indian state and its Nehruvian socialist mixed economy, with the protagonist serving as an allegory of the nation.[20] Having introduced the class-based structural deprivation of ordinary people, Sen goes on to explore

[20] The economic policy of the development model adopted by Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister was that of a mixed economy based on socialist ideals, with the private and public sector coexisting.
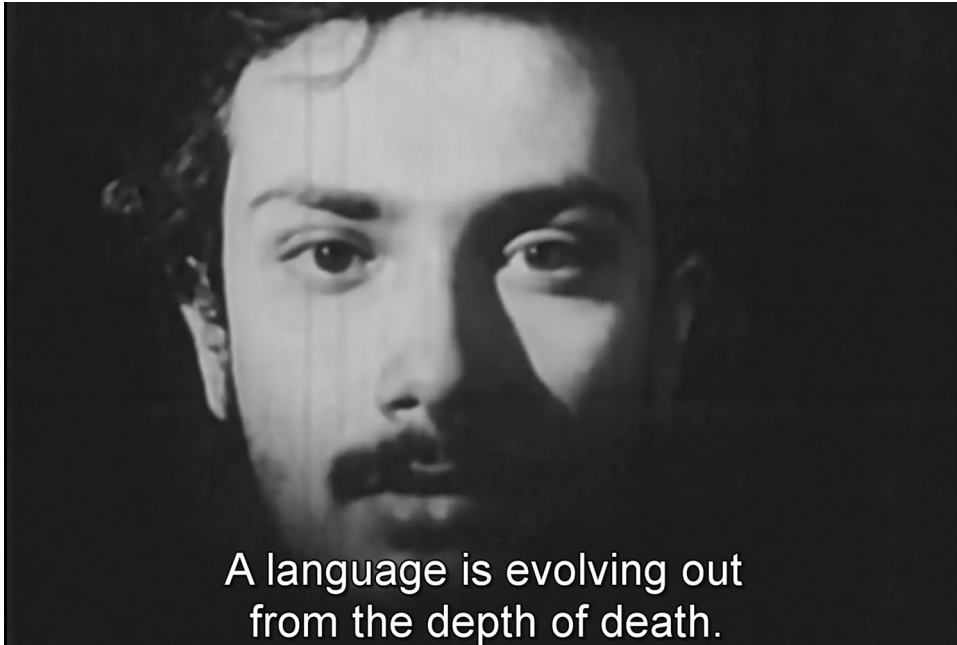
Fig 4: Radical revolutionary politics as the language of resistance

further the long history of exploitation in India under colonialism together with feudalism, and mass movements resisting this coalition, in order to contextualize the Naxal movement as its vertex (fig. 4). The voice over narration in the opening sequence of *Calcutta 71* epitomizes the spirit of *The Communist Manifesto*. The film critiques the colonial nature of the Indian state and advocates the need for decolonization for a complete social transformation. Through the objective precision of a documentary, the film represents the 'dialectics of hunger'[21] in India highlighting the interconnection between the infamous Bengal famine of 1943 and the Food movement of 1959, demanding food security, with other movements building the base for the Naxal movement in the late 1960s. Sen points out: 'I wanted to interpret the restlessness, the turbulence of the period that is 1971 and what it is due to […]. What we wanted to do in [*Calcutta 71*] was to define history, put it in its right perspective'.[22] An eclectic interspersing of contemporary documentary footage, location shooting, jump cuts and montage marked Sen's aesthetics of cinema of the oppressed, constructed agitprop; giving his Calcutta Trilogy the look of a newsreel thereby helped him to archive his 'time' and the cityscape in cinema.

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[21] Udayan Gupta, 'Introducing Mrinal Sen', *Jump Cut*, 12–13 (1976), 9–10 <http://www.ejumpcut. org/archive/onlinessays/jc12-13folder/MrinalSen.html> [accessed 20 March 2017].
[22] Ibidem.

The Calcutta Trilogies of Ray and Sen are complementary, with each film providing important blocks in the counter-historiographic discourses on contemporary India that they construct. While Sen's films present the social and political realities from the perspectives of direct political engagement of the protagonists, Ray represents the view of those disengaged from political activism yet equally affected by it. *Calcutta 71* represents the memories of underdevelopment and hunger[23] whereas *Adversary* foregrounds the social, cultural and ideological discordance that symbolize the rapture within the nation. Ray's style is more akin to Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave, while Sen's is motivated by the aesthetics of hunger and the imperfect cinema of Latin America. Their films on the Naxal movement work simultaneously as visible evidence of the political mayhem and state-sponsored violence against political dissent in India, and the visual archive of political activism in Calcutta.

The Naxal movement was instrumental to parallel cinema's impetus to go beyond the 'swadeshi enterprise'[24] of that national cinema which sought to validate the nation-building project, by uncritically recycling cultural stereotypes of 'Indianness' on screen. The political elite considered the Naxal revolt against the Indian state an anti-national insurgency that destabilized consensual equilibrium. It is not surprising therefore that national cinema, working as what Althusser calls the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA),[25] abstained from representing it while the movement was at its helm.

Spectacularizing the Revolution: Bollywood Revisits the Naxal Movement

While parallel cinema actively ventured to free itself from the 'swadeshi enterprise', Bollywood consistently held onto it. After being accorded with

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[23] This film is thematically and aesthetically aligned with Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (*Memorias del Subdesarrollo*, 1968) and Glauber Rocha's *Land in Anguish* (*Terra em Transe*, 1967), demonstrating Rocha's influential aesthetics of hunger.

[24] M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 2. The term *Swadeshi* (literally meaning indigenous, or of one's own country) has a close association with India's nationalist struggle for Independence from the colonial rule. The term *swadeshi enterprise* was first used by noted Indian film scholar Ashish Rajadhyaksha in 1987; Madhava Prasad borrows the term to refer to specific characteristics of Indian popular cinema.

[25] ISAs, as Althusser points out are institutions/configurations that remains formally outside the state control, yet which propagate the ideology of the state. ISAs are different from the RSA in their apparent detachment from the state. Whereas RSAs are formal instruments through which the state functions, ISAs function subliminally to realise the same goal, i.e. to establish and perpetuate the ideology and the hegemony of the state. In addition to education, religious institutions, media, and family, ISAs also include the social media platforms and cultural festivals that disseminate the ethnocratic Hindutva ideology of the present regime. However, prior to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coming to power with an absolute majority in 2014, Bollywood and Indian TV were the most potent state apparatuses used for ideological conditioning of the masses towards the Hindutva ideology.

industry status in the 1990s, following the official denouncement of the Nehruvian economy in favour of a neoliberal one by the Indian state, Bollywood experienced a dramatic change in terms of funding, marketing, distribution, exhibition and the target audience in the process of becoming a global cultural commodity for India. Multiplexes transformed the film-viewing experience into 'an elite affair', and Bollywood films were gentrified to cater to the changing audience demography.[26] Ganti demonstrates how Bollywood began to erase traces of 'poverty, labour, and rural life' from the mid-1990s as part of this gentrification process.[27] Post-millennial Bollywood films use the Naxal movement to bring these traces back within the visual style to make them 'realistic'. Like the parallel filmmakers, the intent of responding to the contemporary political situation was also at work for some of the directors while depicting the Naxal movement. Prakash Jha notes: 'I strive to create realistic images […] content […] weave everything into a popular grammar […] make it engaging because everybody has to see the film, and it has to compete with other films. It's a big battle for me to package my stories for a commercial audience'.[28] During this period people made films with the overseas market, online exhibition platforms and international festivals in mind. Unlike the 1990s, these films aimed to reach to audiences beyond the Indian diaspora. It was therefore imperative for them to break the popular myth about Bollywood films as musicals, offering fresh perspectives. This led the scriptwriters and directors to look for 'realistic' and relatable issues, to introduce novelty while representing the ground reality about India. Naxalism and Maoism — with their long histories of conflict with the Indian state — made Bollywood films appear realistic and relatable to the international audience, thus acquiring parallel cinema's 'artistic seriousness' through the co-option of political content, without disturbing the syntax of cinematic spectacle and attraction. Following Hollywood, Bollywood too ventured 'to create a "world cinema" gaze within a commercial […] framework', by modifying its representational priority and pattern.[29]

Besides this, a change in the post-1992 Indian political scenario may also be responsible for Bollywood's shift in representational priorities. Prasad shows the outward expansion of the political spectrum during this era in India. Rising Hindutva nationalism attempted to redefine 'political unity on a communal foundation' by appropriating of the 'fragile national project,' whilst rampaging capitalism accompanying globalization eroded the function of the state as a political constraint.[30] There was also the emergence of Islamist terrorism as a

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[26] Tejaswini Ganti, *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2012), p. 77.

[27] Ivi., p. 79

[28] Samuel Wigley 'Facing Deadlock: Prakash Jha on Chakravyuh' (2014), <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/prakash-jha-chakravyuh> [accessed on 21 April 2017].

[29] Deborah Shaw, 'Babel and the Global Hollywood Gaze', *Situations*, 4.1 (Fall–Winter 2011), 11-31 (p. 11).

[30] Prasad, pp. 8-9.

backlash to Hindutva fundamentalism — its pinnacle being the demolition of the Babri Mosque by the Sangh combine.[31] Outside this religious fundamentalist politics, the Maoist movement was re-consolidated through the Red Corridor,[32] a reaction to neoliberal policies of the Indian state. The representation of Naxalites as a radicalized group of individuals in Bollywood, such as in *Chamku* (Kabeer Kaushik, 2008), *Reign of the Overlord* (*Sarkar Raj*, Ram Gopal Varma, 2008),[33] *Shanghai* (Dibakar Banerjee, 2012),[34] and *M.K.B.K.M.* (*Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola*, Vishal Bhardwaj, 2013) appear as non-communal secular ways of referencing terrorism and political disruption in India. In this section I discuss how in two post-millennial Bollywood films, i.e. *Squared Formation* and *Newton*, the Naxal movement is used as the narrative backdrop and the source of drama contributing to their genericity. Both films represent a balanced picture of the Naxal movement and the oppressive role of the Indian state, while attempting to unravel the issue of corruption and the corporation-politician nexus in India. However, the films are designed in conformity with the nationalist discourse that promote the idea of the nation as a benevolent family with the government acting as protective patriarchs.

As part of its narrative, *Squared Formation* represents the reinvigoration of Maoist influences as a counter point to the intensified neo-liberal policies of the Indian state, leading to a Naxalite declaration of war against the nexus of the state and multinational-corporations, over the acquisition of natural-resources-rich land — which seriously impaired the environment and the rights of the tribal populations, as well as the socially marginalized Indians inhabiting those spaces. The conflict escalated to such an extent that the Indian Prime Minister declared Naxalism as 'the biggest internal security challenge', seemingly impairing 'the country's growth'.[35] In labelling Naxals thus, he echoed his political predecessor, sharing this opinion as a pretext to declare the Emergency in 1975 to deal with the projected 'threat' from the voices of the dissent. Jha's film includes the Prime Minister's comment and a brief history of the Naxal movement in India, which is delivered through fictional TV news. This was to introduce the movement as the backdrop of his film, immediately establishing a foreboding atmosphere to launch dramatic tension. Instead of a disclaimer, the film begins with a 'claimer' that it 'is based on real-life incidents and characters and nothing is coincidental'.

[31] Aditya Mukherjee, Mridula Mukherjee and Sucheta Mahajan used the term for the outfit popularly known as the *Sangh Parivar* comprising *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), *Visva Hindu Parishad* (VHP), *Bajrang Dal* (BD) and *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), that led the demolition of the controversial Babri Mosque on 6 December 1992 completely transforming the nature of Indian political scenario. This event marks the watershed moment for the rise of the ethnocratic Hindutva fundamentalism in India. See Aditya Mukherjee, Mridula Mukherjee and Sucheta Mahajan *RSS, School Texts and the Murder of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Sage, 2008).

[32] The name of the extensive area covering more than 100 districts in eastern, central and southern India, strongly influenced by Maoist insurgency.

[33] Inspired by Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part 2* (1974).

[34] The film is a Bollywood adaptation of Costa Gavras' *Z* (1969).

[35] Manmohan Singh, 'Naxalism Biggest Threat to Internal Security', *Hindu,* 24 May 2010, p. 1.

Interestingly, although the film denounces its apparent 'fictionality' through a 'claimer', the action of the film takes place in a fictional space named Nandighat.

Squared Formation, a well-researched film on Naxalism in contemporary India, is a political thriller about friendship, estrangement, fratricide, political solidarity, corruption and mis-governance, cast in the Mahabharatik mythical mould. The story revolves around three friends who went to college together. Two of them, Adil Khan (Arjun Rampal) and Rhea Menon (Esha Gupta) become police officers. The third friend, Kabir (Abhay Deol) drops out of the police training academy, unable to cope with the bureaucratic hierarchy, leading to estrangement among the group of friends. The title of the film, *Chakravyuha*, a highly complicated military formation used in the fratricidal battle of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata,* refers to a tragic episode in the epic. In it, Abhimanyu, the 16-year-old son of Arjuna, knew how to break this formation but did not know how to get out of it. Consequently, after voluntarily getting into it, he was trapped and was killed by seven other great warriors — all blood relatives. This term acquired proverbial significance in several modern Indian languages, referring to a situation that does not allow anyone to escape unharmed. The title of the film plays out the metaphorical meaning, signifying an inescapable situation that Kabir voluntarily puts himself into to help Adil, only to be killed by him at the end. The film also uses the fratricidal reference, associating it to the Naxal movement, which saw the murder of revolting Indians by compatriots serving the state. Adil and his wife Rhea are posted in Nandighat, a fictional location in Madhya Pradesh, to subdue the Naxal influence and enable a multinational corporation to acquire the tribal land for a business project. Kabir, a talented telecommunication engineer, volunteers to infiltrate the Naxal guerrillas to provide inside information to help Adil complete his mission. However, after living with the revolutionaries for some time, Kabir begins to sympathize with their plight and joins them. This dismantles the plan as Kabir then becomes a threat to the Indian state. Adil and Rhea lead an attack on the Naxal guerrillas, killing Kabir along with a lot of his comrades. Though the film did not perform well in the domestic market, it received the Indian Maoists' approval for its depiction of their politics. With objections for certain exaggerations, the Maoists expressed their gratitude for political representation on the big screen.[36]

Masurkar, a successful director of critically acclaimed independent films, brilliantly blends necessary components from the national context with 'transnational socio-political issues'[37] contextualizing his black comedy, drama and political satire *Newton* in alignment with the 'growing discourse of politics as an international issue'.[38] Though *Newton* depicts Indian elections as central

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[36] Jaideep Deogharia, 'Maoists Give 4 Stars to "Chakravyuh"', *Times of India*, 11 November 2012 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ranchi/Maoists-give-4-stars-to-Chakravyuh/articleshow/17176710.cms?referral=PM> [accessed 21 February 2018].
[37] Shaw, p. 12.
[38] Alex Lines, 'Adelaide Film Festival: Week 2 Report', *Film Enquiry*, 24 October 2017 <https://www.filminquiry.com/adelaide-film-festival-week-2-report/> [accessed 20 February 2018].

to India's democracy, it also represents several social issues that Jha's film also addresses. The film depicts the Maoist insurgency as politics of disruption impairing the nation's growth and subtly pointing to a consequent disillusionment of the tribal people with the Naxals (fig. 5). Masurkar uses elliptical references to the Naxal movement in his film. Apart from the opening sequence, in which a group of masked armed men kill a politician for having ignored the Naxal's call to boycott the election, the reference to Naxal/Maoist politics is present only through graffiti and discussion among characters in the film. In terms of filmmaking practice, Masurkar seems to do what Alejandro González Iñárritu does in Hollywood: creating hybrid texts as part of the cinema of globalization, amalgamating elements from both national and world cinema to 'create thematic links'.[39] The first postmillennial Bollywood film to receive a government grant of INR ten million, *Newton* had its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival, where it was awarded the CICAE [40] award for the best film before its release in India. A massive box office success that received critical acclaim in India and abroad, this film lauds the electoral systems as a pillar of participatory democracy, leading to social progress as a binary of the revolutionary politics of the Maoists (fig. 6).

Despite being critical of the neoliberal policies of the Indian state run by 'the coalition of bourgeoisie, the rural rich and the bureaucratic elite',[41] corruption, the systemic violence targeted against the disenfranchised, these films do not rigorously challenge the status quo. They fit the fourth category of Jean-Louis Comolli and Paul Narboni's classification as films with 'an explicitly political content […] but which do not effectively criticize the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestioningly adopt its language and its imagery'.[42] Consequently, political dissent is either tokenized without repercussions or is memorialized as a deviant political action. This helps Bollywood create a narrative of permissive 'difference' while working as the ISA. For example, *Squared Formation* represents the Naxal movement as the rural/tribal India's struggle against the hegemony of the state (fig. 7). It makes subtle references to Maoist politics by using Mao Zedong quotes that serve as slogans. Ironically, a police officer in charge of subduing the movement counters a crucial slogan to turn the villagers against the revolutionaries and win them over as abiding subjects of the Indian state (fig. 8). Nevertheless, compared to other postmillennial Bollywood films on the same subject, *Squared Formation* tries to present a balanced picture of reality through its subtly subversive narrative, representing the contestations of the competitive patriarchy in India. The subversive masculinity of Maoist activists is shown in combative conflict

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[39] Shaw, p. 13.
[40] Confédération Internationale des Cinémas d'Art et d'Essai.
[41] Prasad, p. 7.
[42] Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema, Ideology, Criticism', *Screen*, 12.1 (1971), 27–38 (p. 32).

Fig. 5: Maoist politics as an archetype of counter-hegemonic resistance in India
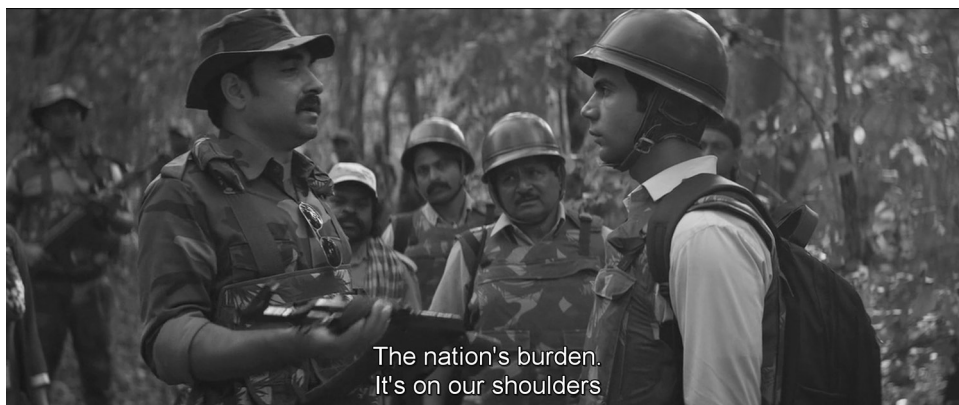

Fig. 6: Newton: critiquing heavy military intervention by the Indian state

Fig. 7: Police-politician-corporate nexus working against the interest of the dispossessed

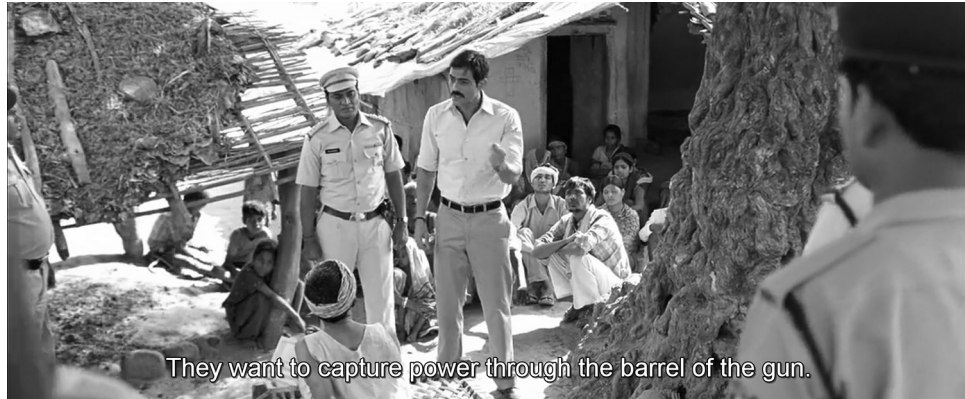They want to capture power through the barrel of the gun.

Fig. 8: The Indian state appropriates the revolutionary slogans used by the Naxals

with the 'hegemonic masculinity' of the state.[43] Images of gun-wielding guerrillas fighting against the state have been repeatedly employed in films thanks to their spectacular potential to concretize on-screen the invisible political expediencies.

Unlike parallel cinema, Bollywood films are teleological and 'Pavlovian'. They trigger a passive spectatorship and are made in consonance with the 'conceptual or belief system'[44] of the Indian state, conforming to the mainstream cinema as part of the Ideological State Apparatus. It is Pavlovian because it elicits 'conditioned response […] based on the prediction and control of observable behaviour'.[45] These films are pedagogical and authoritarian insofar as they limit the viewer's analytic capability while legitimizing an authorized version of nationalism and proscribe the politics of dissent that strongly opposes the oppressive regime of the state. As socio-politically conscious filmmakers repeatedly making films on contemporary issues, both Jha and Masurkar provide nuanced depictions that are strewn with representational stereotypes and subtle contradictions. For example, intercommunal friendship (Adil and Kabir), interstate and intercommunal marriage (Adil and Rhea Menon), a good Muslim in charge of a counter-terrorist operation working under a corrupt Hindu minister and complicit bosses, naïve and helpless tribal subjects, a trigger-happy Naxal guerrilla (the masked figure in *Newton*), a hapless non-committal government employee (Loknath in *Newton*) and an extra-cautious hypersensitive government official (*Newton*) are some of the clichés they use in their films in conformity with the prescriptive nationalism.

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[43] R.W. Connell, *Gender* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2002); R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, 19.6 (2005), 829-859.
[44] Prasad, p. 7.
[45] Ian Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 28.

Despite foregrounding crucial issues of gender, oppression, state-sponsored violence, and the patriarchal nature of the Indian state, these films end predictably by undermining the dissenting contingents that disrupt the projected 'consensual equilibrium' within the nation. They articulate both the official 'story' and myths of competing masculinities in India, in conformity with the ideology of the State.

Conclusion

Contrary to parallel cinema, which aimed to create an audience for political cinema through active engagement, these Bollywood films stick to the usual Hindi-film formula to weave in political content conforming to popular tastes. Hence, in such contexts, the Naxal movement is reduced to 'a backdrop', a 'commodity capital' in a story that is about individuals and not about the collective. The radical politics turns into a commodity capital because of its use as the source of drama to contribute to the films' genericity while being dissociated from its immediate historical contexts, incidentally promoting the prescribed nationalism of Bollywood's 'cinema of consensus'.[46] Interestingly, revolutionary politics is appropriated, by Bollywood as the nation's nemesis on one hand, and to accommodate a critique of the post-1991 neo-liberal policies of the Indian state on the other.

The most distinguishing difference between the parallel cinema and post-millennial Bollywood films is the presence and absence of history as a continuum. The former tries to place the Naxal movement as part of the historical continuum of India and a consequential, collective reaction to the systemic exploitation and structural oppression of poorer Indians. The latter uses the Naxal/Maoist movement as an isolated event without a past and a future, merely as a source of dramatic conflict of the film narrative. Inspired by various counter-cinema movements, from the French New Wave to Latin American Third Cinema, parallel cinema found in the Naxal Movement a ready set of political arguments that were consonant with both their own political alignments and their ambitions to revitalize Indian cinema. This entailed an explicit rejection of mainstream film style, in accordance with traditional Marxist views on the interrelationship between form and content.[47] In post-millennial Bollywood films, the revolutionary content, again as a convenient source of familiar political critiques, was imported into a wholly conventional aesthetic framework, with the result that the original critique is reduced into an empty signifier by being evacuated of its 'ideological dynamics',[48] and historical decontextualization. While parallel cinema was in dialogue with the more radical currents of world cinema, the postmillennial

[46] Eric Rentschler, 'From New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus', in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 260-277.
[47] Sanjines, p. 62.
[48] Ibidem.

Bollywood films share a common premise with cinema of globalization, representing political repression through more conventional means. As such, they mostly appropriate content from parallel cinema, and to a lesser extent its style (deprived of its political import), in the same way that parallel cinema borrowed from world cinema. In that, Bollywood films with political content are in league with a number of Latin American popular films such as Pablo Larrain's *No* (2012), Caetano's *Chronicle of an Escape* (*Crónica de una fuga*, 2006) and Puenzo's *The Official Story* (*La historia oficial*, 1985).