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‘Gangsters by the Bioscope’: South African Indian Cinemas as Spaces of Becoming during Early Apartheid

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ABSTRACT

From the 1940s to the 1960s, South African Indians encountered new cinema spaces opening in their ghettoes in Durban and Johannesburg. Cinemas afforded working-class people an experience of luxury, a sense of a public, and a taste of opportunity and glamour. As part of the negotiation of new diasporic and hybrid identities during early apartheid, cinema played a constitutive role in the reshaping of selves. A balancing act of ‘traditional’ (Indian) and ‘modern’ (Western/South African) cultural elements was required in this reconstruction. Old parts of self had to be at least partially forgotten and new parts assimilated to deal with new conditions. Cinematic identification and the self-fashioning of identity facilitated a reimagining of identity formation as an ‘assemblage’ – a playing out or testing of various new ‘roles’ and positions alongside old ones. One of these new roles was an aggressive Indian ‘gangster’ masculinity, informed by prevailing national conditions and transnational cinematic gangster tropes. Not only did gangsters learn ‘moves’ from the movies, they were also energised by and profited from the movie houses themselves.

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Imagine the extremest possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see everything flowing asunder in moving points and would lose himself in this stream of becoming.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Nietzsche: *Untimely Meditations*

‘Ohhh Victoria Street,’ recalls [Shan] Pillay bristling at the memory. ‘It was a festival back then. It was choko-block! When you looked down from the top of a building onto the box office, it was like a swarm of locusts from the Egyptian plague. Men in punjabis, suits and ties, colourful ladies in their saris with gold jewelleries dripping off their ears and necks and so on.’

—Neil Coppen, ‘The Last Picture Show’

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Introduction

There were several ways in which South African Indians in the middle of the twentieth century engaged – literally and symbolically – with the new cinema spaces springing up in their communities, as part of a negotiation of new diasporic and hybrid identities during early apartheid (defined as the late 1940s to the 1960s). What I am interested in here is the central, constitutive role cinema played in the reshaping of these identities in fresh terrain. Old parts of self had to be at least partially forgotten while new parts were assimilated. In a nutshell, cinematic identification and the self-fashioning of identity in a cosmopolitan environment facilitated a reconfiguring of identity formation as 'assemblage' – a playing out or testing of various new 'roles' and positions alongside traditional ones. One of these roles was an aggressive new Indian 'gangster' masculinity, informed by prevailing national conditions and transnational cinematic gangster tropes.

In earlier research,[1] I examined how South African Indians (or Indian South Africans, depending on your perspective) developed a new semi-cohesive, defensive core identity under hostile colonial conditions. Arriving en masse from 1860 onwards, this 'population group' (to use the language of apartheid) was, in fact, quite diverse, yet as a 'race' denied surety of the right to stay in the country until 1971. Leaving caste behind in India, this brave new identity bridged prevailing binaries of class, race, and religion in the new 'Asian' ghettoes of South Africa. A careful balancing act of 'traditional' (Indian) and 'modern' (Western/South African) cultural elements was required in this construction. In its most basic form this subjectivity was fundamentally conflicted in relation to home and 'transnational' in its liminal imaginings and forgettings. Added to this in the post-war period was an increasingly cosmopolitan aspect to some forms of South African Indian urban street culture. In an examination of Indian or South Asian identities mediated by Bollywood films, Jigna Desai notes the crucial 'ways in which cinema functions to produce and articulate transnational cosmopolitan subjects'[2] in the diaspora. It is difficult to overstate the massive cultural impact both Hollywood and Indian cinema had on South African Indian society in the twentieth century.

Numerous accounts, like Shan Pillay's in the epigraph above, attest to the golden years of cinema in South Africa's Indian neighbourhoods during the middle of the twentieth century and the early decades of apartheid. Some first-hand accounts allude to the restrictive role played by the National Party's spatialising regime, which further limited public space and leisure activities

1. D. Heatlie, '"They Stood Their Ground!": Professional Gangsters in South African Indian Society, 1940–1970' (PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2019).
2. J. Desai, 'Bollywood Abroad: South Asian Diasporic Cosmopolitanism and Indian Cinema', in G. Rajan and S. Sharma, eds, *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 116.

for 'Indians' in the cities when it came to power in 1948. Joburg ex-gangster, M.S., tells us that 'Indian people didn't have much to do – movies played a major role in their lives'.[3] Chotoo Mistry, a young man in Durban in the 1950s, recalls that he and his five friends had only two main social outings in their spare time: 'We used to go to cinema – [and the] beach.'[4] Regrettably, he points out, in the latter 'you can walk around; but you can't go into the water', alluding to the fact that central Durban beaches were reserved for 'whites only'. On the other hand, Mistry remembers that for two shillings you got a front-row seat in a 'bioscope' (cinema), while another 'tickie' (small silver three-penny piece) got you a Coke in a bottle.

But it was not just about lack of opportunities; cinemas created spaces of aspiration, ambition, publicity, temporary luxury, and at least imagined opportunities for a working-class community on the move. Historian Bill Freund talks of the 'inseparable mixture of oppression and opportunity'[5] facing Durban's Indian working-class Indians as they urbanised and built themselves up during the twentieth century. When it hit the shelves in 1951, *Drum* magazine, which became South Africa's leading 'non-white' publication, addressed already cosmopolitan, cinema-going 'audiences' in the South African Indian community. One key innovation was to engage and work with already established cinematic modes of representing and experiencing the world: vicarious images of luxury, power, and agency in the movies were continued in various kinds of *Drum* articles, including some about the nascent Bombay film industry. But before we get on this, it is worth offering a brief survey of the emergence of the cinemas themselves.

The post-war boom in Indian cinemas in Durban and Johannesburg

For some reason, it was not entrepreneurial locals who initially exploited the gap in Durban's Indian leisure market. Neil Coppen reports that in the 1930s 'the white-owned African Consolidated Theatre Group (ACT) was one of the first to cash in on the local Indian population's fixation with the silver screen, erecting the region's first two cinemas, The Royal Picture Palace and the Victoria Picture Palace'.[6] The Victoria was known as 'the bug-house' for the flea bites its patrons left with, while 'the more salubrious Royal was the first to screen Hindi movies'.[7] Victoria Street, in the heart of the Grey Street residential-business complex, would attract other cinema ventures and become known as the cinema strip.

3. Interview with M. S., 5 July 2016, audio recording conducted in Johannesburg.
4. Interview with C. Mistry, 15 February 2016, audio recording conducted in Johannesburg.
5. B. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910–1990* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 1995), 10.
6. N. Coppen, 'The Last Picture Show', Neilcoppen.com (blog), 22 September 2008, https://neilcoppen.com/2008/09/22/the-last-picture-show/, accessed 5 December 2017.
7. Ibid.

Possibly the oldest Indian-owned cinema in South Africa was Rawat's Bio on a road intersecting with Grey Street. The Avalon Theatre followed, opened by co-owners A. B. Moosa and A. I. Kajee on Victoria Street in 1940.[8] Both members of this famous duo were also known in the community as 'moderate' business-oriented politicians. In 1947, after losing the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) to 'communists', they founded their own conservative (state-friendly) Natal Indian Organisation (NIO) at a meeting of 150 delegates in the Avalon building that housed the cinema,[9] adding a political dimension to an otherwise cultural space. The same owners opened the Albert Cinema nearby and 'these [two] cinemas put their comparatively grotty predecessors to shame by boasting air-conditioning, box and gallery seats'.[10] Once the National Party came to power in 1948, however, the expansion of the Moosa cinema empire in 'white areas' would be constricted by white interests.[11]

More competition was to follow as the cinemas, which were both owned and frequented by Indians, flourished. In 1953, Ramnikal Goshalia opened the Naaz Cinema, while the Raj Cinema opened in Prince Edward Street. The magnificent 2000-seater Shah Jehan cinema, launched in 1956 on Grey Street, was the first foray into cinema for the Rajab brothers, from a wealthy, industrious family who were to become major players in the Indian cinema scene. In 1968, the Rajabs also opened the Shiraz Cinema on Victoria Street and by 1976 they were operating their third cinema, the Isfahan.

In Indian areas on the Reef, one likewise finds several cinemas springing up to cater to the community's new desires in the post-war period. In Fordsburg, one could frequent the Avalon, Planet, Lyric, and Majestic cinemas, which all catered to Indian tastes, offering a mixed fare of Indian and Western films. In neighbouring Fietas or Vrededorp, Indian cinemagoers could choose between the Taj on 17th Street, the Royal on 23rd Street, and the Star Cinema on 20th Street. In the more culturally mixed but predominantly 'non-white' world of Sophiatown, Indian audience members could also be found in the Odin Cinema and at Balansky's. Dr 'Chommie' Saloojee, who grew up with Don Mattera in this 'slum' neighbourhood, recalls the area's less salubrious movie houses: 'Sophiatown was gangster cinemas: you had to sit two-two in a seat! The guys, the ushers, would come with a whip to make more money for the

8. V. Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban: Urban Segregation, Business and Visions of Identity from the 1950s to the 1970s', *Occasional Paper* 22 (2014), 166, https://ojs.ruc.dk/index.php/ocpa/article/view/3808.
9. F. Meer and E.S. Reddy, 'Passive Resistance 1946 – A Selection of Documents. Part 4 Special Focus: Wrangling between Political Groups –1947', South African History Online, 23 May 2011, http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/passive-resistance-1946-selection-documents-compiled-es-reddy-fatima-meer, accessed 13 June 2018.
10. Coppen, 'The Last Picture Show'.
11. A. Shepperson and K. Tomaselli, 'South African Cinema Beyond Apartheid: Affirmative Action in Distribution and Storytelling', *Social Identities* 6, 3 (2000), 327.

cinema!'[12] The adjective 'gangster' seems to refer quite loosely to the 'extortionist' revenue model imposed by the cinema owners (and possibly the force deployed by the ushers), rather than any actual gangster affiliation.

Engaging the other in the cinema space

Within the ghettoised South African Indian world, cinemas offered spaces of connection, transcendence, and becoming; new kinds of self-imagination for South African 'Indianness' were made possible. One possibility was to embrace a new cosmopolitan identity by identifying with 'white' characters and Western dramatic situations in Hollywood-genre films. But historian Vashna Jagarnath also claims that in the post-war decades from the 1950s to the 1970s, the Indian film was 'an important influence on the development of Indian identity' and shaped 'ideas and imaginings of India itself'.[13] South African Indians were able to reflect on the limits of their own 'Indianness' by engaging a familiar-yet-different set of Indian roles and issues produced in their country of origin, India. For many young people, Indian (as opposed to American) films were a preference;[14] while Tamil films were to make an appearance, for some reason Hindi films seemed to dominate.[15] Kalim Rajab, from the cinema-owning Rajab family, reveals that the breakthrough film for his family's struggling Shah Jehan cinema was the Bombay-born mega-hit, *Mother India* (1957).[16] This Hindi epic drama, with its female protagonist and theme of maternal self-sacrifice, somehow resonated with Durban Indian audiences in a way that the Rajabs' staple Hollywood fare of musical genres of the type produced by the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios did not.

In going to the movies, South African Indians had a symbolic choice between Indian or Hollywood stories; this spoke to what I have covered elsewhere as the South African Indian 'identity crisis'.[17] Alongside the Western content that was easily distributed to all South African market segments, specifically Indian cinemas were finding ways to import Hindi and Tamil films from the booming Indian film industry for local audiences. As Jagarnath points out, high import tariffs and a political ban on exports to South Africa after 1948 made the importing of Indian films a dodgy and expensive distribution challenge – but demand was such that it happened.[18] By the mid-1950s the Bombay film industry of about 60 studios was in magnitude second only to

12. Interview with Y. 'Chommie' Saloojee, 5 October 2015, audio recording conducted in Johannesburg.
13. Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 165.
14. Mistry remembers in the 1950s 'we used to see a lot of Hindi movies – only Hindi movies. Now and then we used to go for a movie of Hollywood.' Interview with Mistry.
15. Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 167–170.
16. Interview with K. Rajab, 21 November 2017, audio recording conducted in Johannesburg.
17. Heatlie, 'They Stood Their Ground!', 13.
18. Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban'. 167–170.

Hollywood, producing 250 films a year and exporting to several countries, including South Africa.[19] There were also Tamil films making their way to South African shores. The Naaz Cinema's innovation in Durban was to specialise in Tamil features, which resonated strongly with the city's predominantly Tamil Indian community, such as the working-class residents of the Durban Corporation's Magazine Barracks and Railway Barracks.[20]

Generally, Indian films provided a seemingly much-needed cultural connection with the lost motherland and bolstered a sense of 'Indianness'. This was not just about connecting with Indian images, but also about cohesion as a diasporic community. Sumita Chakravarty's study of postcolonial Bombay cinema centres around the notion that the popular Hindi film was thematically involved in a nation-building project through the allegory of 'imperso-nation' (often mobilising the masquerader and the narrative dynamics of 'mistaken identity').[21] Indian cinema in the 1950s, says Prem Chowdry, was grappling with 'the trauma of partition', resulting in a need for representations of Muslim-Hindu togetherness with, for example, regal Mughal tolerance in historical films functioning as an allegory for contemporary multiculturalism.[22] To some extent, South African Indians were simultaneously dealing with the question of a bifurcated Hindu-Muslim identity. But although initially separated along economic and cultural fault lines, the Hindu-Tamil and Muslim-Gujarat ethnicities lumped together as 'Asiatics' by the colonial state had by the 1940s consolidated aspects of a common 'Indian' identity through proximity and for political mobilisation.[23]

Although the American films would have provided the biggest stretch of the imagination for South African Indians, a cultural gap was also evident in the Indian films they were seeing. In some of the Bombay films, audiences were being surprised with representations of a new kind of hybrid, home-grown 'Indianness' that supposedly did not yet exist. A 1955 *Drum* article on India's burgeoning film industry, written from a seemingly South African Indian perspective, criticises the unrealistic story content of many of the films that have 'Hollywood-style plots which do not apply to India'.[24] For one, the boy-meets-girl scenarios of the romantic storylines taken from American films did not correspond to 'Indian reality'. Sharda argues that 'in India, the boy does *not* meet the girl as unfailingly or as single-mindedly as he obviously does in America. Consequently, when the two do meet under the auspices of some

19. D. K. Sharda, 'India's Fabulous Film Industry', *Drum*, June 1955, 46.
20. 'Key Sites: Cinemas,' South African History Online, https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/key-sites, accessed 23 November 2017.
21. S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
22. P. Chowdhry, Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
23. Heatlie, 'They Stood Their Ground!', 15–20.
24. Sharda, 'India's Fabulous Film Industry', 46.

Hollywood-inspired director in India, the meeting lacks realism'.[25] Actress Mumtaz Shanti smoking in a scene is seen as completely out of touch and implausible, as 'no Indian woman smokes'. The article goes on to criticise the revealing Western dress of 'cheesecake artist Nalini Jaywant', described as Bombay's answer to Marilyn Monroe: 'no Indian woman would ever dress like this'.[26]

In the exposing of unrealistic plots and female 'cheesecake' character types, D. K. Sharda is critical of cinema when it operates as a seduction machine. Cinema can stoop to offer up female characters as a form of visual pleasure, but they are characters that have no part in 'Indian reality' (and the allegorical grand narrative of Mother India herself). But what if all cinema were some kind of desire apparatus, if we look at the underlying mechanism of manipulation? At this point, it is worth posing some rather complex questions: what accounted for this massive growth in cinemas and cinema-going in South African Indian areas from the 1940s?

Some of my interviewees made the point, retrospectively, in relation to the myriad of leisure distractions today, that cinema was one of the only 'outlets' or forms of leisure available to young people at the time. In Durban, Mistry says, 'cinema was [the] only entertainment'[27]; while Mamoo Rajab explains there was 'very little entertainment for the Indian, Coloured, black community in those days'.[28] Saloojee explains the comparable situation for Indians on the Reef: 'We had very restricted areas to go to. The good cinemas were in Fordsburg […] Majestic and Lyric.'[29] But was this the main reason for the flourishing of cinema culture? Perhaps there was just something intrinsically more pleasurable or addictive in the cinematic experience than in anything else.

In a seminal article for feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey dissects the pleasures of the cinematic experience: viewing pleasure, she argued, is about taking up the powerful position of 'maleness'.[30] She was not interested in understanding the 'male gaze' as anything 'naturally' or biologically male but rather how certain privileges of looking are constructed and reserved as a male 'position' in a patriarchal regime. Interestingly, in a later essay, she argued that even women can temporarily take up this 'virtual' male position in the cinematic gaze.[31]

Mulvey argues the cinema presents different 'possible pleasures' in looking, including what Freud described as scopophilia: 'taking other people as

25. *Ibid.*, 47.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Interview with Mistry conducted in Johannesburg.
28. Interview with M. Rajab, 31 January 2018, audio recording conducted in Johannesburg.
29. Interview with Saloojee conducted in Johannesburg.
30. L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in C. Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 803–816.
31. L. Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', in C. Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 69.

objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze'.[32] Alongside this voyeuristic pleasure in looking is the narcissistic mode of engagement, operating on a contradictory principle of 'sameness'. Here self-recognition in – or 'identification' with – the other as subject (as opposed to object) takes place. Mulvey shows how psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan roots the child's ego formation in a primary identification (the mirror stage) with its own bodily image, projected and recognised outside of itself as an 'ideal ego'. This happens initially when the toddler, frustrated with its own fragmentary sense of coordination and powerlessness, sees a more in-control version of itself in the mirror[33] – and promptly imbibes or 'introjects' it. Apart from launching the self as a separate 'ego', the primary identification with the self-image facilitates future identifications with other people and characters in films.

This allows for basic cinematic identification with strong characters, the most wilful often being the protagonist: 'The [main/male] character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the [viewing] subject.'[34] Apart from resonating with the child's early victory over the limited, disorganised body, the process of cinematic identification offers the spectator the possibility of temporarily letting go of their own gendered and racialised ego with its worldly frustrations – and allows 'it' to assume the powerful sense of agency and control of the (white) male protagonist in his gazing and acting upon the world.

What does this mean specifically for the South African Indian spectator in the post-war decades, one might ask? There is the view that a Eurocentric psychoanalytic framework should not be deployed to analyse African identities and experiences with different family structures and child-rearing practices. Here 'children [are] brought up in a variety of contexts, practically all of which contain not "the (m)other" in isolation, but a society in which infants encounter many people'.[35]

bell hooks (1996) raises questions about how black/colonised people relate to white films. She argues that black viewers of white-dominated (and populated) visual culture have long established an 'oppositional gaze', while critical black female spectators have specifically developed viewing pleasures of 'interrogation', 'contestation', and 'confrontation'.[36] She criticises Mulvey's theorisation for its neglect of black female spectatorship: 'Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction

32. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 59.
33. *Ibid*., 60.
34. *Ibid*., 63.
35. K. Tomaselli and A. Shepperson, 'Mirror Communities and Straw Individualisms: Essentialism, Cinema and Semiotic Analysis', *Journal of African Cinemas* 3, 1 (2011), 13.
36. b. hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', in J. Belton, ed., *Movies and Mass Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 249–258.

of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator'.[37]

hooks seems to think that women cannot temporarily identify with or assume the 'male gaze' in a viewing; identification is about conscious choice rather than subliminal seduction. hooks' assertion of a generalised (black female) critical disengagement seems to want to create a baseline embodied viewing experience out of a privileged, contemporary intellectual position. It seems unlikely, though, that either male or female South African Indian spectators paid to go to the cinema to exercise their 'oppositional gaze' and practice non-identification.

While the carrot of some kind of quasi-whiteness, citizenship, and future economic prosperity was dangled in front of the Indian 'population group', 'Indianness' was made or intended to feel subordinate to dominant, superior 'whiteness' under apartheid.[38] With narcissistic identification (identification with the 'ideal ego'), it seems likely that an identification with an out-of-reach white male agency would have been a pleasurable cinematic experience for the subaltern South African Indian. The Indian spectator releases their disempowered status and takes in (and thereby takes pleasure in) the heightened dramatic agency of the white male protagonist.

In terms of facilitating more conscious identifications, there was also the cultural opportunity of cosmopolitanism. Generally understood as 'an expanded idea of humanity which transcends the boundaries of nation and ethnos',[39] a cosmopolitan attitude would be both the cause and the effect of repeat experiences of cinematic identification with white Hollywood characters, in the letting-go of certain aspects of Indian traditionalism and the embracing (at least the sense) of a new global citizenship. This international or transnational identification, largely facilitated by cinema and the print media, one can assume would have been quite liberating and pleasurable in a different kind of way from what some might call, disparagingly, 'mimicry' of the local colonisers.[40] While many notions of cosmopolitanism look to a 'cultivated' self-enrichment of the ego, Arjun Appadurai favours a local, lived variety such as that required of the residents of Mumbai. In his view this entails

> cultural co-existence, the positive valuation of mixture and intercultural contact, the refusal of monoculturalism as a governing value, and a strong sense of the inherent

37. *Ibid*., 254.
38. J. Martin and K. Govender, '"Indenturing the Body": Traditional Masculine Role Norms, Body Image Discrepancy, and Muscularity in a Sample of South African Indian Boys', *Culture, Society and Masculinities*, 5, 1 (2013), 24.
39. A. Appadurai, 'Cosmopolitanism from Below: Some Ethical Lessons from the Slumbs of Mumbai', Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism: Salon 4 (2011), https://web.archive.org/web/20160414163946/http://jwtc.org.za/volume_4/arjun_appadurai.htm, accessed 17 September 2023.
40. H. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', October 28 (1984), 125–133.

> virtues of rubbing shoulders with those who speak other languages, eat other foods, worship other gods, and wear their clothes differently.[41]

One could argue that a similar kind of organic syncretism was already happening by default in the melting pots of Johannesburg and Durban in the 1950s and 60s: cinema just extended the boundaries and allowed for more abstract identifications and connections for South African Indians at a transnational level. Beyond the scope of this article, this connection with and 'plugging-into' international popular culture would reshape South African Indian norms on many levels: gender roles, romantic relationships, personal style (fashion and grooming), sports and other 'lifestyle' activities would all be reformed by the 'new media' of the post-war period.

The fabulous world of cinema

Not only did the filmic content and experience of Indian cinemas provide exciting worlds of difference to observe and relate to, but the contextual apparatus of the film industry 'value-chain' was presented in *Drum* magazine (and presumably received by its readers) as a world charged with opportunity and success. A 1955 feature alerts readers to the 'fabulous film industry of India' emerging in Bombay, second in size only to Hollywood.[42] In a 1959 *Drum* article entitled 'Inside India's Hollywood', the world of Indian film production is explored in more detail, represented as a fantastical and dynamic space of wealth creation (for a few) and employment (for many). Looking at the 'growing' Bombay film industry of over 300 films a year in the motherland, the local writer starts with a familiar framing statement as well as an economic 'fact': 'a fabulous film industry is growing up in India'.[43] The adjective pops up later too when it comes to discussing the select few actors who 'are rushed off their feet with offers' and earn thousands of pounds per film, most of it tax-free: 'their pay is as fabulous as the industry itself',[44] the article entices, before revealing the actual amounts earned. The article offers not only facts and statistics of a burgeoning film industry, but also introduces a laudatory tone by which it communicates the excitement of an Indian success story: a world that is contributing to the development of the Indian economy but is also making a particular class of supercharged Indians 'fabulously' wealthy.

In the 1964 article 'Mr. Lucky', *Drum* seeks to reproduce some of this cinematic 'fabulosity' around local movie makers. The article zooms in on one

41. Appadurai, 'Cosmopolitanism from Below'.
42. Sharda, 'India's Fabulous Film Industry', 46.
43. 'Inside India's Hollywood', *Drum*, May 1959, 26.
44. Ibid.

Sammy Naidoo, a 28-year-old Durbanite,[45] and ostensibly wants to tell the rather banal story of a young 'man-about-town' who has hit a string of jackpots at the races. But the article's subtitle 'The Playboy with All the Luck' suggests that the article is also a bit of a character study, conveying something of the 'fabulous' world of a new kind of local Indian playboy. We are afforded the interpretative opportunity to put together something of this lifestyle through a series of character details:

> Once Sammy used to walk to his work as an accountant. Today he drives a sleek convertible, and as one of Durban's best-dressed men (he has no less than 43 suits) he is a great entertainer and patron of the night spots – and he's just off on his second trip overseas.[46]

We are shown pictures of the dashing Sammy in his convertible, another with a young woman, one of him at work in a suit (he is an accountant amongst other things), and several other pictures of him with his passion, filmmaking. One of the more complex pictures shows him at the races holding his 16mm' movie camera' alongside his 'soccerite pal', Sonny Morgan.[47] Known to Indian readers as a member of the Crimson League gang and at the time 'accused number one' in the infamous Michael John murder trial, Sonny brings a dash of danger to Sammy's picture. But as a good-looking, well-dressed 'cinematic gangster' in his own right, Sonny also extends our understanding of this new playboy culture being explored. The addition of the Crimson League to the *Drum* story might also make us question, even if just for a moment, the 'luck' factor in Sammy's success at the races.

Later we are told that 'Sammy hopes to make movie-making his career' with the equipment he has already accumulated for the value of R7000. Here, filmmaking, signified in Sammy's omnipresent 16 mm Bolex film camera (a level of apparatus we would now call 'prosumer'), works beneath the radar as a key aspect of the playboy's success. Even if he is not a professional or successful filmmaker yet, Sammy belongs to the fabulous world of cinema. We are left with a web of interlocking elements: ambition, luck, movies, gangsters, races, and success. Sammy exemplifies that strange alchemical mix of luck, ambition, and connectedness that we all sense is needed for cinematic success – but perhaps even for success more generally.

Sometimes cinema owners themselves became figures of fantasy, fabulousness, and intrigue. Occasional special feature articles on the cinema-owning Rajab family would marvel at the wealth and power that had been accrued by the six brothers. The 1962 *Drum* article 'The Fabulous Rajabs' takes the

45. I was lucky enough to meet the late Sam 'Mr Lucky' Naidoo through his friend and writer, Aziz Hassim, over a decade ago. He was still involved in some way with the cinema industry and we edited some of his archive film footage into the documentary film I produced, *Legends of the Casbah*, in 2012.
46. 'Mr Lucky', *Drum*, February 1964, 18.
47. *Ibid*., 17.

reader on a voyeuristic journey into the lives of the 'six musketeers of high finance', explaining the attributes and personalities of each brother in the 'millionaire family' and how these combine to create the 'Rajab empire'.[48] But the real meat of the article is the 'trip around their fabulous home' which, as writer G. R. Naidoo puts it, is 'one of the most palatial mansions you could find outside a Hollywood home'.[49] Numerous pictures of their 'pedigreed stable of cars' (a phrase which links the expensive cars to race horses, if not to the whole dubious notion of aristocratic 'breeding') and the brothers in their 22-roomed mansion fill the pages. Paragraph after paragraph describes the ornate furnishings and antiques in the house while providing monetary values for key items:

> On the living room wall hangs a magnificent ivory and gold-inscribed 'Kashan' rug, exquisite in its beauty and intricate in its design. It is valued at over £1,500. In the living room, marble occasional tables hold ancient Chinese pieces of sculpture.[50]

A decade later, when Mamoo Rajab takes over the 'empire' after the family's leading brother dies, *Drum* revisits the Rajabs. While the 1973 article focuses on Mamoo's philosophy of work, the leading photograph chooses to position the dashing young man 'near the fleet of Rajab luxury cars in the grounds of the Rajab mansion'.[51] Decked out in whites and sunglasses, Mamoo is presented pictorially as a carefree playboy character, straight out of the movies.

The point of this vicarious journey into a home of 'fabulous' wealth seems on one level to be an attempt to establish (and thereby indicate a need for) some form of local Indian cinematic celebrity. Neither Bombay nor Hollywood film stars are accessible geographically to local writers or culturally to local readers; the Durban-based Indian cinema owners are, however, local and relatable and stand in for the absence of South African Indian film stars in the glamour and wealth department. If one of the pleasures of this 'text' is the decontextualised visual scenarios or fantasy spaces it puts on offer, the article also functions narratively: it is a rags-to-riches story, an illustration of how Indian values of entrepreneurship, tenacity, and family solidarity can lead to 'fabulous' wealth, even in the apartheid world of white privilege. This 'secret' of their success is more explicitly revealed by the first 'head of the Rajab Empire', Habib Rajab, in a 1962 article enticingly entitled 'The Millionaire Touch': 'we believe in all for one and one for all', he is quoted as saying.[52]

48. G. R. Naidoo, 'The Fabulous Rajabs', *Drum*, January 1962, 14–17.
49. *Ibid.*, 14.
50. *Ibid.*, 17.
51. 'It's Mamoo's Empire Now', *Drum*, December 1973, 12.
52. G. R. Naidoo, 'The Millionaire Touch', *Drum*, February 1962, 67.

Luxury and publicity in the palatial Indian cinema

For Durban's Indian community, cinemas themselves became spaces of palatial luxury and Oriental heritage. At least for Indian readers and audiences, it seems as if the cinema experience had moved beyond just entertainment and a social outing: it was a chance to dream of better things and other places, to rehearse participating in a world of unfettered ambition.

On a very basic level, cinema spaces (and here we should include the exterior facades, the interior foyer space, and the actual cinema) functioned as experiential 'private-public' spaces of luxury for less affluent Indians. Whether it be public toilets, beaches, park benches, or seats on a municipal bus, public space for Indians was constrained and hyper-regulated in the apartheid city. Racial confrontation was a possibility. Going to an Indian cinema was an outing that allowed one to feel at home in one's 'Indianness', but also to experience the collective sociality of the Indian community as an insular 'public' – or as Jagarnath puts it, 'where people would come together'.[53]

While ordinary Indians could not afford to live in the style of the Rajabs, for a small fee they could temporarily inhabit and enjoy a genteel, luxurious space – awe-inspiring décor, luxuriant upholstery, and atmospheric air-conditioning were just a few shillings away. These places, with their exotic Persian-inspired names, have been described as 'palaces of excess and enjoyment'.[54] Coppen reports that the Grey Street complex cinemas 'attempted to outdo one another by decking out their interiors to resemble those of decadent Mughal palaces'.[55] Jagarnath explains that this was partly because most cinema owners were Muslim, but also – referencing Edward Said's ideas on Orientalism – because of the dominant story of India's past: 'In orientalist representations, the Mughal era has been developed into the general idea of India's history',[56] with Indians both in India and the diaspora having nostalgically clung to this vision. This continued 'self-Orientalisation' of previously Orientalised people is a form of 're-Orientalism', Lau and Mendes argue, allowing for both 'cultural self-fashioning and subversion'.[57] On top of the short-term rental of luxury space, Indian cinemagoers were thus also able to marvel at what they held to be their glorious heritage and affirm their 'Indianness' in its imagined historicity. In the absence of publicity and a sense of national belonging, South African Indian cinemas operated as pseudo-public spaces for alienated Indians, gathering places that allowed for a space of passive cohesion and ethnic identity.

53. Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 168.
54. *Ibid*., 169.
55. Coppen, 'The Last Picture Show', n.p.
56. Jagarnath, 'Indian Cinema in Durban', 168–169.
57. L. Lau and A. Mendes, eds, *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics* (London: Routledge, 2012), 3.

The cinema space in the Indian underworld

One of the new subcultural identities to emerge in the cosmopolitan street culture of the 1950s and 1960s was that of the 'gangster'. This was a term that in mid-century South African Indian parlance covered a range of roles and illicit activities, from corner street 'runners' peddling fah-fee lottery tickets or dagga to professional middle-aged mafioso-styled extortionists – and then a whole lot in-between. What they shared in terms of a new masculine urban identity was unquestionably shaped to a large extent by identifications with the Hollywood anti-heroes of gangster films in the 1940s and 1950s. I have scrutinised this particular identification process in some detail elsewhere;[58] but what is less obvious is the important role played by the actual cinemas, both economically and symbolically, in sustaining and shaping the 'moves' of these Indian gangsters in Durban and Johannesburg. Author Aziz Hassim alludes to the importance of the many 'Casbah' cinemas in the life of Durban's Grey Street Indian neighbourhood.[59] The Young Victorians Gang was enmeshed with the functioning of cinemas in the district. Operating out of central Victoria Street (where, as we have seen, many of the Indian cinemas were to be found), the Young Victorians were the 'junior arm' of the dominant Durban gang, the Crimson League.[60]

Hassim tells us that these young hustlers made their money controlling the 'black market' in cinema tickets.[61] Mamoo Rajab recalls his uncles' 'naivety' when they opened the Shah Jehan in 1956: 'We didn't realise that gangsters operated in and around cinemas. […] They would go in and buy out all the tickets. And then they would stand outside with their runners and they would sell these tickets at a premium.'[62] Invariably there was some 'commotion' or dispute involving the black-market transactions and the Rajabs' response was to hire their own 'gang' of security guards to police the foyer and the exterior of their cinema.

But it was not just this minor form of parasitism that affected the cinemas; extortion, the preserve of the 'big boys', the professional gangsters, was also rearing its head. Hassim describes metaphorically – and cinematically – the multilayered connections between the gangsters and the cinemas in the Durban Indian underworld:

> The Motas' [gangsters'] cars, which were all black and huge, glittered as the neon signs from the Avalon Cinema flashed across them. In each car there were two or three sinister-looking men, their felt hats pulled low over their faces. Although the parking bays on either side of the road were empty, the drivers ignored them and were double-parked, almost in the middle of the road, with the engines running.[63]

58. Heatlie, 'They Stood Their Ground!', 120–137.
59. A. Hassim, *The Lotus People* (Johannesburg: Real African Publishers, 2002).
60. *Ibid*., 179.
61. Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 179–180.
62. Interview with Rajab conducted in Johannesburg.

This overburdened literary image cleverly conjoins the spaces of cinema and gangster through the neon light of the cinema sign. In doing so it seems to want to communicate the impact of the cinematic fantasy space on the Durban gangsters, who emulate their cinematic anti-heroes in manner and style. But it goes beyond that, hinting at a story that is not being told and providing more questions than answers: What are the cars doing there? Have the gang bosses (the 'Motas') come to visit the cinema and for what reason?

J. P., a junior member of the Crimson League in the late 1950s, reveals that, indeed, at least one of the Crimson League leaders would 'visit' the Avalon. In a reflection that seems to refer to extortion, he says: 'Whenever you went to them, [to] the owners of Avalon Cinema […] Right, Akie used to go there for the boys. [R]30,000, [R]20,000 [R]10,000 […] Whatever, ja! It had big money that time'.[64] It is not clear in this passage whether the subject 'It' in the last sentence refers to the gang or the cinema; but what is clear is that 'Akie' refers to Akie Vahed, one of the 'Big Five' leaders of the Crimson League, who evidently was the League's connection to the Avalon. J. P. insists, however, that this kind of transaction 'was not extorting: that was a favour for the boys'.[65] Why the Avalon's owners would want to give such large gifts (which implies no benefits) to the League is not explained.

Rival cinema owner Mamoo Rajab tentatively corroborates this story: 'There was this story that Akie was in on the Avalon because he ensured that nothing happened at the Avalon – so that story is possibly true.'[66] When it came to the Rajabs' cinemas, in particular the Shah Jehan, he claims that their own security force and the gang's 'respect' for their family meant that they were at no point pressured by the Crimson League to accept protection. The respect was there 'because we knew them. We knew Akie Vahed, we knew Goolam Boxer, and we knew, on the sidelines, Daddy Naidoo. And we knew very well […] Mohan Govender.'[67] Govender, a well-known second-level member of the League in the early days (but eventually hiving off and clashing with second-generation Crimson Leaguer Sonny Morgan), is described as a special friend of the Shah Jehan: he is the one who takes the Rajabs to the Crimson League when one of the gang's members abducts a female Rajab family member.[68] So while it seems that they might not have paid protection fees directly to the League, the Rajabs do seem to have had a League 'protector' in Govender.

The relationship of 'protection' between gangsters and cinema operators had similar forms in other cities. In Cape Town, the Globe Gang of District Six seemed to have held the cinema as one place where they behaved themselves.

63. Hassim, *The Lotus People*, 201.
64. Interview with J. P., 2015, audio recording conducted in Johannesburg.
65. *Ibid*, 16 Oct 2015.
66. Interview with Rajab conducted in Johannesburg.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*

While they would never have to pay and could remove paying patrons from their seats, the Globe Gang also 'helped the manager keep order. When we were seriously working, you could hear a pin drop any time during the show.'[69] In Johannesburg, there was also some kind of understanding between the two stakeholders. A *Drum* article from 1952 reports that 'cinemas in Fordsburg and Ferreirastown are threatened if members of gangs are not allowed in free. Most cinema owners refused to comment.'[70] By the late 1950s, Dan September, the main henchman in Sherief Khan's gang, had a job as 'some kind of bodyguard' at the Majestic Cinema in Fordsburg: E. P. remembers that 'if anyone did anything, Dan was there to evict you from the cinema. But Dan was very tough!'[71] Presumably employing one of Khan's gangsters meant the Majestic had some form of arrangement with Khan. But the gang leader also seemed to have a connection with the Avalon Cinema in Fordsburg: at Khan's party to celebrate the successful outcome of a 1964 murder trial, a 'Mr Carrim' from the Avalon was spotted as one of Khan's guests.[72]

Sites of incitement, scenes of violence

It is speculated that Reef gangster 'Old Man Kajee' had some kind of security guard status with a Durban cinema at one point in the 1930s. But a posthumous account of the man in *Drum* glosses over this, with just an oblique reference to the 'silent movies' of his time: 'The Old Man's career really began in the early days of the silent movies when the streets of Durban were dusty and to become a feared character, you had to show your strength in Grey Street.'[73] The description raises a question: why are the movies even mentioned in this description? The quality of 'strength' is not mentioned as something explicitly required for the job of supervising behaviour in and around the cinema, nor is Kajee's 'bouncer' role even mentioned. Simply by being mentioned in the same sentence, an unexplained, indirect link is created between the gangster and 'the movies'. While both are performed by a 'character', it is as if Old Man Kajee is conjured up by the silent movies as some kind of larger-than-life persona who just sort of stepped off the screen.

In this way, the cinema sometimes plays a more symbolic role in the world of the South African Indian gangster. Goolam Gangat, a collector for Khan's syndicate in the 1950s and early 1960s and a man supposedly prone to nasty behaviour, was murdered 'dramatically' and publicly on the street outside a cinema. A

69. M., 'The Gruesome Inside Secrets of the Globe Gang', *Drum*, April 1954, 46.
70. 'Gang War Crisis!', *Drum*, November 1952, 17.
71. Interview with E. P., 30 Mar 2017, audio recording conducted in Johannesburg.
72. J. Mayet, 'It Was the Party That Went with a Swing …', *Drum*, September 1964, 39.
73. 'The Power of Old Man Y', *Drum*, June 1971, 21.

Drum account recalls that 'there was one of their so-called strong-armed men of his who was a bully. He was chopped up outside a Fordsburg cinema.'[74] And in one sentence, the narrative logic of transgression leading to punishment is rendered in a simple moral: 'live by the sword, die by the sword'. Another account mentions the 'brutal slaying of Goolam Gangat with an axe outside a Fordsburg cinema': what in earlier accounts was a stabbing has here been enhanced to a 'chopping' with an axe. Apart from this dramatic encoding of the story of Gangat's life, there are also more visually evocative or 'cinematic' renditions of his death in accounts closer to the time of the murder. A report that came out soon after his death ends with a literary flourish that visually encodes and projects the final scene of the gangster's short life:

> Gangat was at war with society. It was a war to the death. But when 'Big Mouth' died – knifed down into the very street he had terrorised – nobody had won anything. And as the gutters washed away his blood from the street outside that cinema in Fordsburg, so too they washed away some of their foulest memories.[75]

All of the representations here insert the backdrop of the Fordsburg cinema as a relevant detail. In its symbolic role, the cinema is figured as a spectral yet libidinal space of possibility and transformation, but also one of transgression – where you can go too far, forget your identity, your social constraints, and indulge your id. But other ids are liberated here too. Yes, Gangat the gangster was liberated by the cinema, but he was also killed by it, this image seems to warn.

Another act of gangster violence is similarly represented with the cinema once again in the 'background' of the 'scene'. E. P. recalls the Khan gang's attack on the 'Malay Mob' – in part a retaliation for Gangat's murder – as that incident 'when they shot them in front of the cinema in Vrededorp'.[76] Was E. P. confusing the Avalon cinema backdrop of the Gangat killing with the '17th Street shootings' a few months later? Or had the gangsters decided to execute Gangat's killers, publicly, in front of a cinema in a kind of cinematic tit-for-tat? There was indeed a cinema on 17th street, but we cannot know the killers' intentions. Whatever the case, E. P. remembered the salient details: that the act took place outside a cinema. In these and other representations, it is almost as if the cinema acts as a site of incitement, a place outside which a fight can erupt, or even be staged. Perhaps the cinema in some way represented the unconscious itself, the Pandora's box of repressed aggressive drives – and physical proximity to the repository allowed one to access those drives.

In what is itself a highly filmic image, writer 'Mac' Carrim, visualises the flamboyant Junior Adam, still a youngster in Khan's gang in the 1950s, in

74. 'The Battle of Bullet Corner – Old Man Y: Part III', *Drum*, August 1971, 59.
75. 'Gangat's Bid for Power – The Life of a Gangster Part II', *Drum*, April 1964, 55.
76. Interview with E. P conducted in Johannesburg.

front of a cinema: 'I can see him right now with his white Panama hat, beautiful floral shirt, dark pants – and his convertible car, cruising past the Majestic bio. […] I can actually see him!'[77] This leads immediately to the memory of a rivalrous incident in which he got the better of this young gangster, when Junior gave him trouble: 'And I just pushed him up against a wall. Then he said something; [I just[klapped [smacked] him a couple of times. And we never had trouble again after that.'[78] The 'Majestic bio', a cinema in Fordsburg, here again forms the background of an image-memory complex and incites a memory of physical domination.

Conclusion: learning new 'moves'

In this article, I illustrate the pivotal role cinema played in the South African Indian experience and the reimagining of selves in the post-war decades. Flourishing cinemas in Indian areas, showing both Indian and Hollywood films, afforded working-class audiences an experience of luxury, offered them a sense of a public, and teased them with a taste of opportunity, difference, and glamour. The new Indian gangster identity was perhaps the clearest example of the transformative power of the 'bioscopes'. Not only did gangsters insert themselves into cinema economies and symbolically draw on their evocative power, but they actively learnt new habits from the movies. There are numerous accounts of local flaneurs and delinquents mimicking and assimilating 'gangster' behaviours from American films in the 1950s and 1960s. Having grown up amongst street gangs, Hassim assures us that Indian gangster behaviour was moulded by gangster movies.[79] In a *Drum* article from 1953, Old Man Kajee warns that a problem with gangster films is the emulation of specific criminal techniques: 'There are many tricks which even seasoned gangsters learn,' he says.[80] Evidently, Sherief Khan himself, the great Reef crime supremo, spent a lot of time in and around the cinema[81]: *Drum* photographer Jürgen Schadeberg recalls that 'he was an avid crime movie fan, borrowing a lot of jargon and ideas from the gangster films'.[82]

This self-fashioning from violent movies was not limited to professional gangsters. Growing up with Don Mattera and his Vultures street gang in Sophiatown, Saloojee tells us that 'a lot of gangsterism we would learn from the movies'.[83] While they emulated some of the moves from gangster *flieks*

77. Interview with M. 'Mac' Carim, 6 Dec 2017, audio recording conducted in Johannesburg.
78. M. Carim, *Coolie, Come Out and Fight!* (Johannesburg: Porcupine Press, 2013).
79. N. Tolsi, 'When Movies Still Had Magic', *Mail and Guardian Online*, 26 July 2009, https://mg.co.za/article/2009-07-26-when-movies-still-had-magic/, accessed 29 July 2017.
80. Old Man Kajee, 'My Life in the Underworld: III', *Drum*, August 1953, 15.
81. Interview with M. S.
82. J. Schadeberg, ed., *The Fifties People of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Bailey's African Photo Archives, 1987), 208.
83. Interview with Saloojee conducted in Johannesburg.

[movies], Westerns were another fruitful genre for learning. Saloojee recalls: 'They would act it out, they would see a film, say *Apache* – Apache was dynamic, he was good with a knife. So, we would learn from those things, you understand, we would act some of those things out in the streets.'[84] Rather than just the usual child-like simulation of action moves, the idea with this gangland choreography was to translate them into effective fighting techniques.

A *Drum* account of the Salot Gang linked their violent behaviour to their predilection for Hollywood gangster performances: 'They modelled themselves on American film gangsters: they would often be seen sitting in their "cabs" with slouched hats and twiddling revolver triggers.'[85] Similarly, Goolam Gangat, the legal clerk turned extortion collector for Khan's Reef gang, imagined for himself a new persona straight out of the movies:

> [He] wanted to create for himself the image of a tough, Chicago-style gangster. The huge, left-hand-drive Chrysler typified for him the sort of life he wanted, the sort of brash elegance he loved. There were two bullet holes in the windscreen he refused to have repaired. It gave his ego a perverse boost to see them.[86]

One could see all this performativity as just passive escapism – and, certainly, the grinding, crushing reality of apartheid for South Africa's Black, Indian, and Coloured citizens would at times have been side-stepped with an outing to the darkened space of the movie theatre. But in the transcendence of national constraints through an assimilation of transnational positions, one can discern an active process of affiliating and becoming, a reconfiguring of identity that speaks to the possibility of human agency and creativity even under oppressive conditions.

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84. *Ibid.*
85. D. Hancroft, 'Crimson League: A Name That Spells Terror to Thousands', *Drum*, January 1953, 15.
86. 'Goolam Gangat – The Life of a Gangster', *Drum*, March 1964, 24.

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