

Ruin And The Uncanny City

Memory, despair and death in *Parinda*

RANJANI MAZUMDAR

The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture.

Jonathan Raban

Popular cinema is perhaps the most innovative archive of the city in India, saturated with urban dreams, desires and fears. In this essay, I reflect on the 'urban mood' of Bombay in the 1980s through the intricate workings of terror in a popular film. Vinod Chopra's *Parinda* (1989) is a story of despair and death where terror becomes the vehicle through which urban spectacle is destroyed and the image of Bombay as the 'dream city' turns into a violent nightmare. There are two issues central to the discussion of terror here. The first is the elaborate mediation on urban space through the use of specifically cinematic techniques. The second is the allegorical evocation of the city as the site of *ruin*, darkness and the uncanny.

Parinda weaves an intricate plot that deals with the Bombay underworld and its overpowering capacity to destroy ordinary dreams and pleasures of the city's residents. Karan (Anil Kapoor) returns from America after completing his education, full of dreams and romantic feelings for his childhood sweetheart Paro (Madhuri Dikshit). These dreams are shattered when Anna, the eccentric underworld don, gets Prakash, a police officer (Paro's brother played by Anupam Kher) killed when he meets Karan at a favourite spot of their shared childhood. Kishen (Jackie Shroff) who works for Anna, tries to dissuade his brother, Karan from appearing as a witness for the state. Unable to work through the law, Karan gets involved with Anna and strikes a deal with a rival don to kill all the three responsible for Prakash's death. Subsequently Karan marries Paro and decides to leave the city for their village. On their wedding night, Anna kills Paro and Karan. Unable to save his brother's life, Kishen finally kills Anna. The ordinariness of *Parinda*'s plot is however energised through a complex evocation of space to show urban terror. *Parinda* does not use many locations, instead the limited use of space is fragmented further through a skilful editing pattern that combines film noir cynicism with Eisensteinian montage and Hitchcockian terror.

Space, terror and despair in the mythology of Bombay

In his exploration of Bombay's spatial characteristics, particularly its density and pressures on the ordinary worker, Sandeep Pendse says that over the years there has been a gradual destruction of privacy and ordinary conversation because of the overcrowding

of *chawls*¹ by multiple families. The claustrophobia of the urban crowd, overwhelming the limited space available to them, makes the struggle for a personal world almost impossible. Movement within the city usually involves an effort because “the city as a total entity, in its entirety is only a notion, an abstraction, not something really known or grasped”. Added to this is the density of construction, which artificially encloses space in the city. “There is a constant, though at most times well hidden and perhaps even unrealised fear that the ‘closed-up’ space may conceal a danger or a death trap” (1996: 14).

Many writers have commented on the decay of Bombay, its loss of community and spirit, equating this process with the rise of the criminal underworld. In a personal encounter with the crisis of the city, writer Pinki Virani uses the phrase “Who Killed Bombay?”. Virani’s despair stems from a loss of faith in collectivity – that the citizens of the city have given in and allowed Bombay to disintegrate. Virani looks at the loss of the city’s dreams, a place where dead souls now walk the streets. For Virani both collusion and fear have worked towards expanding the underworld’s base. She also draws attention to large-scale upheavals in the city like the textile mill workers’ strike in the early eighties. The strike stretched for over 18 months, finally discredited and defeated. Many workers who had migrated to the city and worked in these mills were subsequently unemployed (1999).

In another detailed account, Rajni Bakshi notes that the strike (which was the biggest and the longest in the history of India) in retrospect had all the makings of a “suicidal death wish”. Driven by their circumstances, but unable to see what they were up against, the ordinary workers were caught in a “morass of impotence vis-à-vis the world”. While Virani’s instinct is to present this vast multitude of unemployed men as the ground for an increase in crime, Bakshi sees a certain nihilism and self-destruction emerging from an inability to sustain the force of the strike. For most workers, in the end, the defeat was a personal tragedy (1986: 232).

While these are ultimately perceptions of resident journalists, they present us with a narrative of despair that many people share in the city of Bombay. The key issues in Virani’s, Bakshi’s and Pendse’s narratives are migrant workers, unemployment, nihilism, tragedy, underworld, claustrophobia and terror. All these perceptions seem to coalesce in the complex formal structure of *Parinda*, presenting the city as a giant home for spatial anxiety, *ruin* and the uncanny

Ruin and the ‘architectural uncanny’

It was Walter Benjamin who first presented the city as the site of *ruin* in his *Arcades Project* (2000). Benjamin developed the idea of an allegorical gaze that would seek to understand *ruin* as the opposite of the phantasmagoria of the city. *Ruin* enables one to see history not as a chain of events, marked both by linear time and the glory of civilisation, but as a narrative on death and catastrophe. The modern city, which articulates itself as the glorious culmination of industrial culture, hides behind the spectacular and seductive world of the commodity. Yet the city as *ruin* can be excavated through an allegorical gaze that allows one to deal with estrangement, alienation and spatial displacement within the city.

Parinda develops the image of the city as *ruin* through a peculiar articulation of the ‘architectural uncanny’. Anthony Vidler suggests that the notion of the uncanny as an



older private form transforms itself into a public experience in the modern metropolis. The metropolitan uncanny was commonly associated with all the phobias related to spatial fear, in particular claustrophobia. The uncanny therefore works metaphorically to articulate a "fundamentally unliveable modern condition". The interpretive force of the uncanny is best captured in film where the "the traces of its intellectual history have been summoned in the service of an entirely contemporary sensibility". In the literary and cinematic form the uncanny emerges within a tense space where the yearning for a home and a fear of homelessness constantly impinges on desire and freedom. Thus the homely, the domestic and the nostalgic are constantly placed under threat (Vidler: 1992: 10). In the uncanny city of the imagination, memory, childhood, nostalgia, claustrophobia and primitivism co-exist to produce a distinct form of spatial anxiety. Destroying the myth of the rational planned city from within, "this modern uncanny always returns as the labyrinth to haunt the City of Light" (Donald: 1999: 73).

In cinema, the fascination for dark spaces became central to the representational strategies of film noir. Noir films evoked a "savage lyricism" emerging as a critical tendency within popular American cinema. Some have called it an "anti-genre that reveals the dark side of savage capitalism" (Naremore: 1998: 22). One of the principal features of noir is its ability to destroy urban spectacle. By using low-key photography to evoke shadowy and mysterious spaces, the texture of the city is given a twist directly in opposition to the phantasmagoria of aerial photography so commonly used in tourism and travelogue films. Urban display is countered by dark shadows, panoramic visions with fragmented shots and the glitter of daylight with the darkness of the night. Paul Schrader has suggested that in the period of noir films after the second world war (1941 to 1958), "Hollywood lighting grew darker, characters more corrupt, themes more fatalistic, and the tone more hopeless" (1996: 53). Clearly one can draw a connection between Benjamin's evocation of *ruin* in the city and the shadowy pursuits of the noir genre. For in many ways the dark textures of the city have enabled a cinematic exploration of the idea of *ruin*.

Film noir and the dark city: Anna's death wish

The now abundant literature on noir suggests that the genre's aim was to articulate the crisis of experience within 20th-century capitalist society. Alienation, the unfulfilled yearning for romantic love, the psychological crisis of humanity and an inability to make human contact became the social markers that defined noir. Noir is usually identified by its pessimistic mood and sense of foreboding, an intense anxiety, fear and the latent inevitability of death. In *Parinda*, death is not associated with martyrdom. Rather death is the event that is the culmination of a series of failures. Central to the narrative of death is the noir-like darkness of the city.

Parinda's Bombay is fragmented into dark, morbid spaces with all the characters framed within a light and shadow zone. Rarely in the film do we see a riot or spectacular display of colour. There is a peculiar obsession for the night, for darkly lit interior spaces that are fragmented as against the panoramic vision one usually gets in Hindi cinema. The city appears decrepit and spartan with no directorial gesture towards conventional cinematic spectacle. Modern life, said Sartre, increasingly appears like a "labyrinth of hallways,

doors, and stairways that lead nowhere, innumerable signposts that dot routes and signify nothing" (cited in Polan: 1986: 252). *Parinda's* alleys, closed spaces, ordinary sites, elevators, dark staircases, peeling walls and streets are ubiquitous. The city is dark, crowded and ruthless whose human form is Anna.

Anna is the centre of the city whose social net connects him to the police, other underworld rivals, factories, politicians and so on. Anna's eccentricity or 'madness' is central to the way the city's lawlessness and decay is portrayed. He is ordinary and spectacular, human and inhuman, powerful and vulnerable. Like in noir films, *Parinda* offers a combination of the themes of excess, the bizarre, cruelty, madness, innocence and a fascination for death. Death here acquires a ceremonial quality, elaborately staged.

Parinda opens with long-shots of the city of Bombay in twilight as the credits appear without the loud, spectacular music usually associated with Hindi film credits. The eerie sense of danger is evident from the staccato music. As twilight turns into night, a sense of expectancy and mystery surrounds the city. The credits end with the director's name appearing on the long-shot of a house with light filtering out of the window. Here the music soundtrack is mixed to introduce a mechanical sound. In the next shot the sound is identified as we see a little toy moving on the floor. There is a clear association here with a child, but we see no child as the camera tilts to show Anna standing before a photograph of himself, a woman and a child. We hear a woman's tortured singing on the soundtrack as Anna folds his hands to pray before the garlanded portrait. The strangeness of the scene is evident since the portrait on the wall seems to evoke the death wish of a tortured yet powerful man².

This initial introduction is suddenly interrupted by the sound of the phone as Anna turns to walk towards the sound. He picks up the phone and curtly says "*Anna*". We then hear the sound of a scream and the profile of a dead man's face, shot in close-up. In the next cut we see the face of one of the three men who have killed the man. As the men wipe the blood off the weapons they have just used, we are introduced to Anna's close associates. The close-up of weapons and faces in low-key lighting makes this moment look like a ritual killing. The discontinuity in the editing imbues the killing with a level of grandeur, ritual spectacle and 'primitivism'. This aesthetic framing of death is repeated several times in the film. Like in the classical form of Eisensteinian montage, the act of killing is never directly shown but created through an effective editing pattern. Eisenstein believed that montage was produced by the collision of two pieces of film unrelated to each other. The content of a film should unfold in a series of shocks linked together in a sequence and directed at the emotions of the audience (1977: 45-63).

Film noir heroes tend to live in the present, retreating into the past only when they are unsuccessful in the present. Themes of loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities and insecurity are presented primarily through mannerism and style (Schraeder: 1996: 58). Anna's mannerisms are peculiar, his eccentricity and madness are linked to a traumatic event, the burning of his wife and child. Somewhere in the film, a cameo character informs Karan that Anna fears fire because he burnt his wife and child alive. This fear of fire is introduced at several moments in the film through fragmented visual intrusions (bodies enveloped by flames) and always from Anna's point of view. This fear of fire is of Anna's own making,

embedded in the recesses of his consciousness. The fear of the 'self' is thus his greatest weakness and ultimately consumes him at the end of the film.

Anna's power and complexity, his psychic investment in violence, are established through associations: objects (the toy), memory (the portrait, the singing), the burning figures of his wife and child. Anna talks about the need to forget, even though the past follows him constantly. He maintains a simmering exterior, a savage control, an ascetic persona and intimacy with the everyday violence of the city. The psychological investment in Anna's character clearly breaks with popular representations of villains in Bombay cinema who are rarely invested with a complex past.

Terror in *Parinda* is linked to 'madness' and madness has to be located spatially. Anna brings to his performance a sense of both everyday ordinariness and a spectacular and exaggerated form of brutality. Anna's importance lies in his ability to render visible a sense of internal destruction and neurosis that drives the people around him to brutal deaths.

The uncanny invasion of private worlds

The inability to sustain a personal private world runs throughout *Parinda*. In what is perhaps the only romantic moment, Karan and Paro go to her house after a scuffle with one of the killers near a temple. We hear night sounds of the city as Paro cooks inside the apartment. Karan is in the verandah. Paro walks up to him and tries to console him. A romantic song intercut with images of their childhood follows. This happy moment is suddenly interrupted when the lights go off and Paro drops her plate. A disturbed Paro pleads with Karan not to leave her. The song resumes and ends abruptly again when the phone rings. The juxtaposition of these sounds with the song on the soundtrack introduces a terrifying invasion of personal space. The song resumes after some time and then ends with Kishen breaking into the house to drag his brother away.

This experience is developed again in Karan and Kishen's apartment. When Kishen is shot, Karan brings his injured brother to the apartment. The doctor comes home to treat Kishen and leaves promising to send a nurse. Karan uses all the latches to bolt the door. Karan's fear is justified as in the next shot the killers talk to the doctor in the darkly lit staircase outside the apartment. The doctor is with the underworld. Just as Karan and Kishen start reflecting on their childhood entry into the city, the doorbell rings again. This ominous sound is intercut with close-up shots of Kishen, Karan, the doorbell and the staircase outside the apartment showing the killers ringing the bell. Here the shots are repeatedly cut to music and end in silence with the staircase now empty. The doorbell rings again after a pause, and this time Karan walks gun in hand towards the door with Kishen begging his brother not to open the door. Again the film uses a montage of shots and sounds as Karan removes all the latches to reveal the nurse standing outside. Unknown to the brothers, their private space is already invaded by someone whose real self is not visible to them. The night clock chimes and the nurse injects Kishen. Suddenly the doorbell rings again. The nurse tries to walk to the door but is prevented by Kishen. Karan again moves gun in hand towards the door, as Kishen shouts from his bed. All the latches are again removed and Paro walks in. In a stressed state Karan tells her he cannot be a witness because Anna's men shot his brother. There is an argument and finally Karan agrees to be a witness.

The incessant use of the doorbell to trigger tension inside the apartment is cinematically developed through a Hitchcockian montage. Close-ups of faces, door latches, the gun in Karan's hand, are regularly intercut with the sound of the doorbell to create a palpable tension within the apartment. The power of the sequence lies in its very cinematic quality, its ability to create a visual and aural language with which a written narrative cannot compete. While the visual appears like a set of fragmented shots, the soundtrack combines Kishen's desperate voice with the sound of the doorbell and highly effective music. Fear is now all-inclusive as terror is omnipresent. The next day at the police station, Karan refuses to be a witness when he learns of the nurse's identity. As Vidler suggests, the uncanny emerges as a "frame of reference" that positions the desire for a home and domestic security with its exact opposite" (1991: 12). In *Parinda*, the cycle of terror encircles the city, the home and the private world of the protagonists. As a result the desire for peace becomes a nostalgic yearning for a return to childhood.

Childhood memory and the city: the form of remembrance

Childhood impressions and experiences connect all the characters including Anna as orphaned children. Childhood images are woven together through songs and a few conversations that allude to that experience. Childhood is a state of homelessness. Living on the 'footpath' is brutal and cruel, but also full of hope. Images of the children singing on Bombay's Marine Drive are presented against the magical backdrop of the Nariman Point skyline. The city is represented here as the city of dreams. This mythology of the city is linked to the idea of childhood and dreaming. The city never appears magical in the adult life of the characters.

Karan and Paro's relationship too develops during their childhood at a neighbourhood fountain – an image that is recalled in their adult life, only to be destroyed by the violence around the site. The twilight hue of many of the childhood sequences invests the past with a certain beauty, magic and innocence. Yet *Parinda*'s childhood images are like snapshots, dislocated and unresolved. They do not provide us with a well developed chain of events. Memory in *Parinda* appears like a series of unfinished moments. Recalling the past of childhood homelessness seems to be the only way to deal with the terror in the city.

Childhood remembrance and perceptions are particularly significant in the development of an urban identity. As an adult these perceptions turn into nostalgia, remembrance and yearning. In the *Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin presents us with a series of impressions of the Berlin of his childhood. Contrasting his style of remembering the past with autobiographical writing, Benjamin suggests that while the mapping of time in the classical autobiography tends to be sequential and linear, urban reminiscences are usually discontinuous (1992: 316). The relationship of specific locations to time and the ways in which the city both shapes and in turn is shaped by memory, becomes the core of Benjamin's investigations. The space of moments and discontinuities presents the recent past as fragmented, fleeting and in the form of snapshots.

It is this aspect that seems so relevant to the structure of *Parinda*. For unlike other popular film narratives that create a temporal continuum of past/present/future, *Parinda* produces the past in flashes, as incomplete and unfinished moments of the past, which

are relevant only in the adult life of the protagonists. All the characters remain caught in a battle with fate, their past and their futures, and all are defeated by life in a poignant loss of innocence in the city. The film however goes beyond just the everyday sites of memory to question even the mythic power of the monument, whose relationship to the city has always been complicated.

Monument and the city

The monument is a deeply contradictory site, often presenting itself as the concentration of a city's historicity. As a spectacular space, the monument renders the city to the world, while at the same time displacing the everyday sites of memory. Benjamin says the monument hides the persistence of barbarism in the present. It presents us with a false history, eternalising the past as a closed space, with an end. However Benjamin also sets up a series of counter monuments that bear witness to a personal history.

In *Parinda*, the space of both the monument and the counter monument of the individual is shattered by the spectacle of violence. The film uses the Gateway of India, the Babulnath temple located in Malabar Hill and a neighbourhood fountain as spaces of terror. The use of these display sites which are central to the cartography of Bombay are turned into nodes of violence and death. Fragmenting the panoramic vision of tourism photography, which establishes monuments and display sites as beautiful and spectacular markers of the city, montage in *Parinda* creates conflict and introduces the uncanny shock of the urban.

In one of the most dramatic scenes of the film, Prakash is murdered at a neighbourhood fountain, a site which has traditionally evoked romantic and joyful associations for all the characters, particularly Karan and Paro. The fountain operates here like a counter monument, a particular site of memory whose use in the film is deployed effectively to show both the yearning for peace and happiness, as well as its impossibility within the space of the city.

The fountain is the place where Prakash and Karan are meeting after many years. Just before their meeting they are shown in two cars driving through the city's labyrinth singing a song of their childhood. During the song we are taken back to the past to see childhood shots of happiness, anger, destruction and love. The Nariman Point skyline is often present in the childhood sequences. These visuals are woven into the song and are important for their depiction of innocence, hope and a child's vision of the city 'at first sight'. As Karan and Prakash finally reach their meeting point, we have already been introduced to their friendship. From here on the editing changes along with the music as the car with the killers arrives at the site.

Parinda's film editor, Renu Saluja, contrasts action and emotion through a rapid back and forth structure. We see the glass panes of the car come down three times, intercut with shots of the startled pigeons, each time a window comes down. The killers are revealed through this montage just before the gunshots and Karan's helpless expression as his friend is shot. The entire action is fragmented into minute parts with close-up shots of the pigeons (startled by the sound of the gunshots) providing the bridge for the editing pattern. In Saluja's words, "city films demand a kind of editing where the cutting is visible". Saluja

contrasts the editing here with that of a lyrical storyline where the cutting is made to look invisible (Mazumdar & Jhingan: 1998). In *Parinda*, on the contrary, disembodied shots are put together through a stylised editing technique to produce the shock of the urban. The images are cut to the sound of music and gunshots, creating a montage from collision, rather than linkage.³

Like the fountain, the Babulnath Temple emerges as another violent space. Karan runs up the steps of the temple to see Paro feeding pigeons. Paro has broken up with Karan since he refused to be a witness for her murdered brother. Karan walks up and expresses a sense of desperation to Paro who finally relents, knowing that Karan himself had no role in her brother's death. A romantic song plays on the soundtrack. Suddenly Karan spots one of the killers and starts chasing him down the steps, followed closely by Paro. The downward descent introduces a dynamic movement. The spectacularly visual conflict of steps, people, lines of force and the sound of the temple bell are all linked together through the chase. The chase down the steps stands in contrast to the casual climbing of other temple visitors. Moving from the close-up of running legs on the steps to long-shots of all three characters, the sequence appears to combine montage based on the mechanical beat of cutting and montage based on the pattern of movement within the shot. As a statement on a sacred site of the city, *Parinda's* urban space is enveloped by crime and violence.

The Gateway of India is similarly implicated in the violence around the city. Throughout the narrative, the Gateway is used as a major backdrop. While Kishen is shot by Anna's men near the Gateway, it is the use of this structure in the climactic moment of the film that concretely presents it as a space of terror. Karan and Paro decide to spend their wedding night on a rented boat near the Gateway. The couple want to return to their village. The narrative presents this imagined space of the village as a sign of hope away from the violence of the city. But this was not to be. From the crowds thronging the Gateway of India, participating in the revelry of New Year's eve, Anna emerges, both as a man of the crowd and a stranger to that crowd. He boards a little boat that ferries him and his companions to Karan and Paro's boat. This entire sequence is presented again through a back and forth editing structure.

We see the Gateway of India, well lit, with its crowds. Anna on his boat moving towards the other boat is regularly cut with shots of Karan and Paro making love. The erotic energy of this sequence is heightened by its fragmented and expressive quality. This is regularly contrasted in quick succession with Anna coming closer to the boat. Just as Karan and Paro reach their climax, with Karan whispering the name of their future son, Anna pushes open the door and releases a volley of bullets. The bed is now covered with blood. The power of the monument to imagine the beauty of a city is systematically destroyed, as Bombay looks dark and terrifying, a city of death.

Death as ruin

While there are many characters that die in *Parinda*, the cinematic shock in the erotic and aestheticised killing of the newly-wed couple after a sensual lovemaking sequence is the climactic moment of the film. With the volley of bullets, the two fall into each other's arms, united in death but unable to reach their dream. Death here is symbolic at many

levels – while the return to the village is no longer possible, the return to childhood is fleetingly posed through a childhood song playing on the soundtrack. It is this utopian flash combined with deep despair that makes *Parinda* such a fascinating film about the city. Throughout the narrative, we are reminded of the village. But the return to the village is now no longer possible.

Parinda does not try to project a heroic figure caught in an urban nightmare. Instead, every character except Paro colludes in the making of the nightmare. The film's cynicism lies in the way the yearning for happiness is constantly posed but never fulfilled. Through a narrative about homelessness, the footpath, death and self-destruction, *Parinda's* city transforms into a site of *ruin*, emerging as an allegorical response to the urban experience in India.

NOTES

1. Dilapidated buildings with small rooms connected to a shared balcony. A *chawl* of five to seven storeys can have almost a thousand people living in it.
2. In India, photographs on the wall are garlanded only when the person is dead.
3. Collision was central to Eisenstein's theory of art. The intensity and meaning such collision takes would depend on the qualities of the opposing forces in the colliding shots.

REFERENCES

- Bakshi, Rajni, *The Long Haul: The Bombay textile Workers Strike* (Build Documentation Centre, 1986).
- Benjamin, Walter, *One Way Street and Other Writings* (Verso, 1992).
- Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- Donald, James, *Imagining the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1999).
- Eisenstein, Sergei, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1977).
- Mazumdar, Ranjani and Shikha Jhingan, "The Journey from the Village to the City" episode in *The Power of the Image*.
- Naremore, James, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press: 1998).
- Pendse, Sandeep, "Toil, Sweat and the City" in *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India*, Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner eds. (Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Madras: Oxford University Press: 1996).
- Polan, Dana, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative and the American Film: 1940-50* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
- Raban, Jonathan, *Soft City* (London: 1974).
- Schrader, Paul, "Notes on Film Noir" in *Film Noir Reader*, Alain Silver and James Ursuni eds. (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996).
- Vidler, Anthony, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).
- Virani, Pinki, *Once Was Bombay* (Viking Penguin India, 1999).