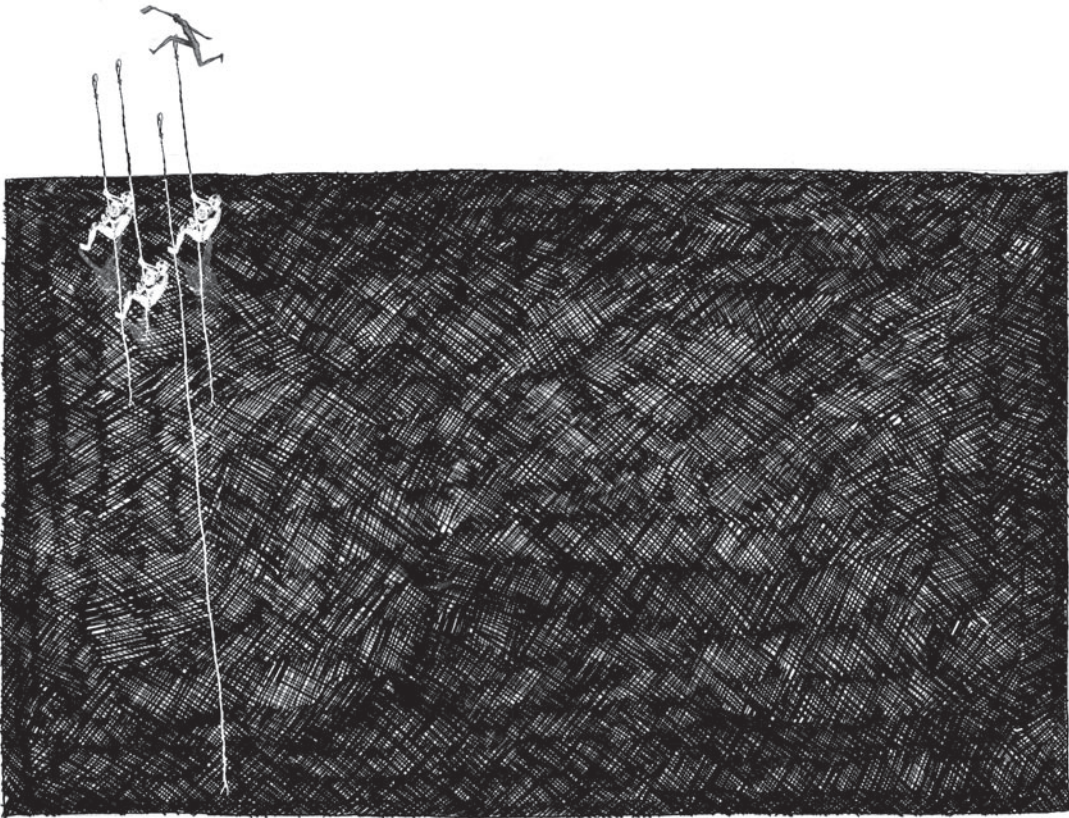


SCARED ON SCREEN



A Reply to Terrorism on a Wednesday

A Citizen Vigilante's Prescriptions for Governing Terrorism

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In the film, *A Wednesday*, the protagonist calls the police commissioner of Mumbai to inform him that four terrorists need to be released, failing which he will set off bombs in different locations of the city. A whole set of negotiations and events follows at a staggeringly frantic pace with a climactic turnaround when the purported terrorist emerges as a “stupid common man”. He makes it known that he intended to kill the released terrorists because the government and the bureaucracy had failed to “nip them in the bud”. When asked about the reasons for his actions, the vigilante retorts, “They asked us this question on Friday, repeated it on Tuesday, I am just replying on Wednesday”.¹ The “Friday” and “Tuesday” mentioned here point respectively to the 1993 blasts in Bombay, as the city was then known, and the 2006 train blasts in the hence renamed Mumbai, that occurred on those particular days. The reply on a “Wednesday”, then, is a response to those incidents and the questions raised by those blasts.

A Wednesday premiered amidst serial bomb blasts in various cities across India. During this time, some other 'just released' films were also trying to understand the intimate connection between terrorism and urban environments.² Some of these films, including *A Wednesday*, attempt to comprehend terrorist activities of the past, and therefore hint at a tempered composure granted by distance from the events, and yet such distance is rendered elusive as their production and releases become crisscrossed and punctuated by further, experientially felt terror incidents.

Analysing *A Wednesday* involves grappling with three interrelated questions: a) How does a citizen in the form of a vigilante who has experienced the trauma of terror align her(him)self with regard to the nation/state as s/he responds/reacts to that terror? b) How are 'codes of terrorism' depicted in the fictive time of the thriller and how do they help differentiate the terrorist from citizen vigilantes (as depicted in other films), and parallel our experiencing of media-represented/simulated terrorism? c) Finally, in this temporary alignment and consequent cooptation of the vigilante by the state, what discourses of governmentality are put forward?

The distinct appearance of 'vigilante' subgenre films in Bollywood cinema happened during the 1970s, and it wasn't sheer coincidence that their rise took place alongside a growing dissatisfaction at the breakdown of the legal system, state corruption and recognition of the collapse of traditional lifestyles.³ Such an eruption of vigilante justice films is not something particular to India. Claire King, while talking about the post-9/11 vigilante film, *The Brave One* (2007), mentions that prior films of the genre date back to *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Taxi Driver* (1976), which came just when the United States was undergoing its post-Vietnam crisis.⁴

Susan Hayward in her essay "Framing National Cinemas" asks why a nation, which is perceived as a "social cultural community", becomes hyphenated/associated with the state, which is a legal and political concept. She answers: "[N]ationalist discourses around culture work to forge the link – the hyphen – between nation and state".⁵ Hayward notes that in framings of national cinemas, "the artifact 'film' speaks of/for/as the nation".⁶ Borrowing from the work of Patrick Hall, she then arrives at an argument about the nation both masquerading as a historical subject and at the same time hiding behind and/or concealing concrete practices of power and knowledge that the state carries out in the nation's name. When applied to vigilante films, vigilante justice appears/intervenes when the state itself is not able to provide justice, when the state is found to be incompetent in governing/protecting the nation. In such historically contingent situations, the citizen vigilante in the films comes to stand in for the nation, other-ing the state and venting anger at the state's inability to adequately exercise its practices.

Strategic negotiations between the vigilante and the state, as mentioned above, also occur in *A Wednesday* but with a few key differences. Such variations emerge because the vigilante by implementing the 'codes of terrorism' is able to have a slightly inflected relationship with respect to the city and the state. In citizen vigilante films, the city forms the backdrop to the vigilante/anti-hero in his/her avatar of an urban warrior.⁷ The protagonist

in *Zanjeer* (1971) finds himself in a haunted running scene on a low-lit road in Bombay's darkness. In *Deewar* (1975), two brothers have an epic confrontation over their mother (allegorically, their motherland) standing on an urban bridge. Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson in *Death Wish*, 1974) and Erica Bain (Jodie Foster in *The Brave One*) encounter crime on every street corner of New York. What such scenes have in common is an intimate engagement with the city as one physically negotiates its spaces. In *A Wednesday*, the cartography of violence in the urban landscape undergoes a certain kind of revision with the "stupid common man" as vigilante, sitting atop a building with a panoptical gaze of the city.

In the film, the vigilante makes his way to the top of an unused building where he assembles a cornucopia of communication devices: SIM cards, mobile phones, address diaries, a mini television set and a laptop. After setting up the equipment, he calls up not only the city police commissioner, but also television journalist Naina Roy. The audience is treated to the now all-too-familiar unfolding of a terror hijack, with the media always a player caught between the state on the one hand and the terrorist on the other. If terror indeed thrives on information, of which it must deprive the victim,⁸ the deceptive "stupid common man" garners information through Naina Roy's news channel and dodges the police's attempts to track down his location by switching SIM cards and using re-routed mobile phones. He sees the city through television, he does not seek his enemies on the streets of the city. His ensuing telephonic duel with the commissioner begins to resemble Paul Virilio's conceptualisation of international warfare as an "optical confrontation" which involves "seeing", "foreseeing" and "not being able to see", and where "winning is trying to keep the enemy in constant sight".⁹

After an early round of negotiation, the citizen vigilante calmly regards the view from his rooftop, with a slow-panning camera showing the city moving around him (and not the other way around). The audience is then presented with a series of fast-paced, sharply edited shots of the commissioner pacing the police station, directing his officers over the phone as they frantically try to detect bombs in crowded malls and train stations. The camera finally takes us back to the vigilante, but not before it tilts up from the ground to show us the height of the building he is operating from. Thus, if crowded streets, traffic lights and shanty dwellings do rush past in the backdrop, they are not encountered by the citizen vigilante (as in other films) but by those pursuing him. Later, the vigilante confirms the released terrorists' identities through conversations with them by cellular phone, after which he annihilates them by just pressing a button.

Thus, the purported terrorist's strategic deployment of ICT-enabled gadgets helps the film in parcelling space and time in a novel way to show the citizen vigilante navigating the city's geography through aural and visual electronics. Additionally, it gives the impression that the Mumbai police lack the technological infrastructure to efficiently nab terrorists – they are unable to pinpoint the vigilante's exact location and have to seek the assistance of an amateur hacker, by which point a lot of time has elapsed. The audience is often reminded of the critical role played by 'time' in the thriller. Time is crucial for the vigilante – not only because he needs the police to procure the four terrorists he names and have them brought to the place of his choice before they locate him, but also because 'time' forms a part of his

discursive arsenal against the “government’s indecisiveness in handling terror”, as he terms it. The inefficiency of the police is judged and measured by the time it takes them to finally ascertain the co-ordinates of the vigilante’s location. After blowing away three purported terrorists, the vigilante remarks, addressing the police, *“It takes ten years for you to prove a person guilty. Don’t you think this is a question mark on your ability? All this should stop. This whole bloody system is flawed. If you don’t clean up this mess, then we will have to do something about it”*.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

The cited delay in convicting a person is part of a polemical speech asking for tougher laws to combat terrorism. In the past, terrorist organisations have opportunistically used this protracted time (“ten years”) to free their imprisoned mates by hijacking Indian citizens.¹¹ For the film’s domestic audience, witnessing the inability of the police to effectively react to a vigilante-constructed terrorist threat, it is not difficult to connect this inability as being symptomatic of the larger incapacity of the government (“bloody system”) to deal with (“clean up”) terrorists within a certain ‘time window’. Thus, in the fictive time of the thriller, inundated with fast action-reaction events, a “politics of speed” (Aradau and Munster, 2006) characterised by decisive executive action seems to be privileged over a “slower, deliberative democratic model” to tackle the constructed risk of a perceived terror attack.¹²

The fictive time of the thriller does not allow the audience much time to reflect, and it stands in for a real time when the government, too, does not have time to reflect. The prescriptions given to the police (the state) by the vigilante (the citizen) for checking the menace of terrorism are presented as perfect common sense – after all, quickness and decisiveness are required to comprehend a film (especially a thriller) and a democracy (which comes to resemble a dromocracy¹³). However, it is precisely the identification of the audience with the vigilante’s ‘anger, trauma, everydayness and fear’ that provides the affective foundation upon which rests the perfect rationality of continuously accelerated decision-making, trying to keep up with always-running-out time.

The vigilante is distinctly middle-aged; he pants after climbing stairs. Retribution delivered, he walks away carrying a grocery bag. He is neither a poster boy for the resurgent youth of ‘India Shining’ nor an activist affiliated with an NGO, but is someone who nestles himself into the middle of the Indian middle class. When he talks about his being afraid of “getting inside a bus or train these days”, and of his wife thinking that “he is going to war while... [he is] actually going to work”,¹⁴ the audience has already related his condition with their own experientially felt everydayness of fear.

Although the vigilante maintains that his actions are not a result of sentimental loss, he refers to how images of his now dead co-passengers on the local train flash through his mind. His traumatic condition can best be described as “an unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind”.¹⁵

But we must not forget that the film is unfolding in circumstances that are also ideal for channelling personal (‘place-based’) traumas into collective (‘national’) trauma ‘in pursuit of’ (around) conflicting causes, for, as Kirby Farrell asks us to bear in mind, “people not only suffer trauma, they use it, and the idea of it, for all sorts of ends, good and ill”.¹⁶ By allowing

the vigilante to return to everyday life, the state in a way accepts his argument that tougher laws are indeed needed. Moreover, this attitude of the state helps it mend the earlier, clipped 'nation(-)state' hyphen – in a symbolic gesture, the vigilante (the nation) and the commissioner (the state) meet each other as seeming strangers and shake hands.¹⁷

One has to acknowledge the film's inventiveness in foregrounding the 'everydayness of terror and the technologies facilitating it' in a mediated, democratic world. However, connections need to be drawn between audience perception/cognition of the pace of the film, the speed of information dissemination/processing during terror events and the film's positioning of the citizen with respect to the nation-state amidst/around the fear of terrorism to evaluate how particular citizenship roles and governance practices are enunciated that limit the scope of deliberative democracy in their attempts to securitise cities.¹⁸

Notes

1. Excerpts from **A Wednesday** (5 September 2008), dir. Neeraj Pandey.
2. Indian cities where serial blasts took place during the year 2008 include: Jaipur (14 May 2008), Bangalore (25 July 2008), Ahmedabad (26 July 2008), Delhi (9 September 2008) and Guwahati (30 October 2008), reaching a crescendo with the Mumbai 26/11 attacks. Among the films, I am particularly referring to **Aamir** (6 June 2008), dir. Rajkumar Gupta, and **Mumbai Meri Jaan** (22 August 2008), dir. Nishikanth Kamath.
3. See Ranjani Mazumdar, **Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City** (University of Minnesota, 2007, Minneapolis). India also underwent a 21-month period of National Emergency starting in June 1975.
4. Claire King. "The Man Inside: Trauma, Gender, and the Nation in **The Brave One**". Paper presented at the National Communication Association's Critical/Cultural Studies Division, 2008.
5. Susan Hayward. "Framing National Cinemas". In (eds.) Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, **Cinema and Nation** (Routledge, 2000, London/New York), p. 89.
6. *ibid.*, p. 91.
7. Considering the vigilantism associated with Naxalite/Maoist attacks and their operations in rural areas, it can be argued that citizen vigilante films are not restricted to urban spaces only. However, instances of such representations are difficult to find in Bollywood cinema.
8. See Shiv Visvanathan, "Thinking about Terror", in **The Economic Times**, 1 August 2008.
9. Paul Virilio. **War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception**, (trans.) P. Camiller (Verso, 1989, London), p. 3.
10. Excerpts from **A Wednesday** (2008).
11. One of the most talked-about incidents was the seizure of Indian Airlines Flight IC814 on 24 December 1999. The flight was forcibly taken to Kandahar; the hijack ended with the release of three militants. The ongoing trial against Ajmal Amir Kasab, accused in the 26/11 attacks on Mumbai, has been a subject of intense debate.
12. Aradau and Munster talk about how the "precautionary principle privileges a politics of speed based on sovereign decision" in contrast to Ulrich Beck's assumption that risk society will "reinvent politics along democratic lines with slow procedures where expert knowledge will be deliberated in the global public forum". See Claudia Aradau and Rens van Munster, "Governing Terrorism through Risk: Taking Precautions, (Un)Knowing the Future", paper prepared for the 'Governing by Risk in the War on Terror' workshop, 21 March 2006, San Diego, p.18.
13. Virilio writes, "There was no 'industrial revolution,' but only a 'dromocratic revolution'; there is no democracy, only dromocracy; there is no strategy, only dromology. It is precisely at the moment when Western technological evolutionism leaves the sea that the substance of the wealth begins to crumble, that the ruin of the most powerful peoples and nations gets under way... It is speed as the nature of dromological progress that runs progress; it is the permanence of the war of Time that creates total peace, the peace of exhaustion". See Paul Virilio, **Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology** (Semiotext(e), 1986, New York), p. 46.
14. Excerpt from **A Wednesday** (2008).
15. Cathy Caruth. **Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, Baltimore), p. 2.

16. Kirby Farrell. **Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, Baltimore), p. 21.
17. Talking of **The Brave One**, Claire King observes how even when vigilante Erica Bain is caught by investigator Mercer (representing the state) on her way to kill the last of her attackers, he covers up her actions although they are both violent and illegal. See King, *op. cit.*
18. Visvanathan finds this situation to be a "failure of politics as an imagination". See Shiv Visvanathan, "Reflections on the Terrorisms of Our Time", **Seminar** 598 (January 2009).