Valentina Vitali

'But Are They All Horrid?' On the Intermittent Use of the Gothic in Hindi Horror Cinema[1]

Nearly half a century has passed since the release of the first Hindi horror film, Tulsi and Shyam Ramsay's *Do Gaz Zameen ke Neeche* (*Two Yards Under the Ground*, 1972).[2] In these five decades the genre has metamorphosed, assuming distinct forms and occupying different positions within the industry. Indeed, a rough chronology of Hindi horror cinema would have to include, in addition to Ramsay brothers' classics like *Purana Mandir* (*The Old Temple*, 1984) and *Veerana* (*Vengeance of the Vampire*, 1988), films as unlike as Mohan Bhakri's *Cheekh* (*The Scream*, 1985), Vinod Talwar's *Hatyarin* (*Killer*, 1991), Ram Gopal Varma's *Raat* (*The Night*, 1992), Kanti Shah's *Khooni Shaitan* (*Bloody Devil*, 2002), Vikram Bhatt's *Raaz* (*The Secret*, 2002) and, all the way to the present decade, horror films directed also by women, like Puja Jatinder Bedi's *Ghost* (2012), Reema Kagti's *Talaash* (*Talaash: the Answer Lies Within*, 2012) and Devika Singh's *Rise of the Zombie* (2013).

Which criteria to adopt to examine the functioning of gothic elements in films as diverse as these? A generic ingredient that first emerged in England when the novel itself was only a few decades old, I take the gothic to refer, today, to a mode that taps into the sub-world of the unconscious, a mechanism to put rational perceptions of reality under pressure (Bigsby, 1987, pp. 105–106) and push to centre-stage the *unheimlich,* the longing for and fear of that sense of displacement also evoked by Dorothea Tanning as she explained the choice of title for her painting *A Mrs Radcliffe Called Today* (1944):

I was in a kind of gothic mood. The mood of longing for a displacement, of another

time, another place. I had read gothic novels (…) They were permeated with this mist

of mysterious and unpredictable atmospheres of places that I didn't know about.

(Tanning, 1989, p. 31)

Perhaps partly because of the very nature of the gothic – 'mysterious' and 'unpredictable'–

literature on the gothic in cinema has tended to be descriptive, pointing empirically at

characteristics shared across select texts but rarely explaining why those films or what those

effects may do in them beyond, that is, looking gothic. Here I want to propose, tentatively,

the outlines of a method that may help us delineate in a more systematic fashion which

factors may contribute to the presence of the gothic as an ingredient of *some* Hindi horror

films and not of others, and to its operation in those films.

The Gothic as a Function of Thematic and Industrial Criteria

Since the task at hand is to trace the gothic across a body of very diverse films, I suggest we

build into our method an axis of continuity, a trope broadly defined enough to enable us to

cluster a wide range of Hindi horror films together. One of Hindi cinema's earliest and most

seminal foray into the gothic dates back to Independence and Partition: Kamal Amrohi's

Mahal (*The Mansion*, 1949). A few others followed, notably Bimal Roy's *Madhumati* (1958)

and Raj Khosla's *Woh Kaun Thi?* (*Who Was She?*, 1964). Rachel Dwyer and Meheli Sen

observe that female sexuality looms large in these Hindi gothic texts (Dwyer, 2011; Sen,

2017). In *Mahal* Ranjana (Vijayalakshmi) sings of 'the sorrows of her unconsummated

marriage' and 'the lack of sexual fulfilment' (Dwyer, 2011, p. 143, 144), while Asha

(Madhubala) entices Shankar (Ashok Kumar) in a fantasy of extramarital desire, a sexual

obsession for the ghostly Kamini/Asha. *Madhumati* and *Woh Kaun Thi?* are similarly preoccupied, with the tribal Madhumati's (Vijayanthimala) unfulfilled love, and with Madhavi (Vijayanthimala again), Sandhya (Sadhana) and her many apparitions' sexual power to drive, respectively, Raja (Pran) into a trap (in *Madhumati*) and Anand (Manoj Kumar) insane (in *Woh Kaun Thi?*). This is not to say that female sexuality is the only trope at work in these gothic films. It is, rather, to stress that while it is a subject that recurs regularly in most gothic texts, female sexuality is simultaneously a trope to which all manners of other, of-the-moment preoccupations attach, as they do generally in melodrama. Whereas in the Hindi family romance (and in film melodrama generally) female sexuality is more often than not brought back within the boundaries of the socially permissible – within the family or at any rate a sanctioned reproductive framework, in the (Hindi) horror film female sexuality is by and large in excess, un-channelled and non-reproductive. This is so in *Mahal* as it is in contemporary Hindi horror films like *Rise of the Zombie*, where Neil's (Luke Kenny) trouble is explicitly presented as connected to his neglect of his demanding lover, or *Talaash*, where Rosie's (Kareena Kapoor) sexual appeal and Surjan's (Aamir Khan) extramarital attraction to her are contained by casting Rosie as an immaterial ghost. I return to these films below.

With genre 'issues of texts and aesthetics (…) intersect with those of industry and institution' (Gledhill, 2000, p. 221), generic categories pointing to films as simultaneously symbolic acts and commodities. Taking this into account and to enable us to differentiate between films as different as *Mahal* and *Rise of the Zombie* I suggest we build into our method a second axis, one capable of linking a film's tropes and forms to its position within specific industrial relations of production, distribution and exhibition. It is useful here to revisit what has passed down in film historiography as the Hindi horror film's foundational moment, the day when, sitting in the cinema, Tulsi and Shyam Ramsay realised that, night

after night, the opening of F.U. Ramsay's otherwise unsuccessful *Ek Nanhi Munni Ladki Thi* (*There Was a Young Girl*, Vishram Bedekar, 1970) infallibly caused audiences to

> 'break out in claps' (…) In a world dominated by romance and thrillers and action and comedy and tragedy and drama and socials, often all of them in one masala mix 'We realised that people liked being scared'. (Dasgupta, 2017, pp. 11-12)

Two points are worth noting in this anecdote as reported by Dasgupta. First, from the start the two brothers knew that with their first and subsequent horror films they would target not the mainstream, as their father had tried to do, but a niche market. Second, the opening of *Ek Nanhi Munni Ladki Thi* is eminently gothic: it takes place at night in a gothic building, features an unrecognisable Prithviraj Kapoor wearing a monstrous facemask and a hooded monk robe, stuffed animals, high-contrast lighting, looming shadows and an eerie soundtrack. The editing does its best to disorient the viewer. But what was it that the audience so thrilled by such an opening saw in these simple gothic gimmicks?

The gothic is a fantasy. In Freudian psychoanalysis 'phantasies' are unconscious structures that 'seek to express themselves, to find way out into consciousness and action, and they are constantly drawing in new material' (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 317). Second, phantasies straddle between imagination and reality, blurring the boundary between the two dimensions. Indeed, as Bigsby, quoted above, notes, the gothic, like all fantasies, puts rational perceptions of reality under pressure. Third, a phantasy is also

> the locus of defensive operations: it facilitates (…) defence processes (…) Such defences are themselves bound up with the primary function of phantasy, namely the

mise en scène of desire – a *mise en scène* in which what is *prohibited* is always

present in the actual formation of the wish. (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 318)

So, as I have argued elsewhere, in the Ramsay brothers' films horrific effects built largely on gothic ingredients tend to be mobilised in or around scenes of wish-fulfilment and desire, displaying degrees of nudity and sexual behaviour that breaks with accepted notions of modesty and other social conventions (Vitali, 2016). In these gothic moments the spectator finds themselves in the field of vision of the monstrous, a situation that simultaneously facilitates and offers a defence against the pleasure and awareness of breaking rules, the punishment, thrill or pay-off for infringing socially sanctioned codes of modesty. In these films – most of which are, as Sen observes, peculiarly devoid of mother figures (Sen, 2017, p. 69) – it is not sexuality per se that is disciplined. What triggers the appearance of the monstrous and what is targeted by the *mise en scène* is, rather, the act of looking at sexual images, the wish itself. Here the gothic functions as a mechanism to organise the representation of 'excessive', un-channelled, non-reproductive, mostly female sexuality. Vampires, zombies, ghosts and all other manner of evil beings, howling, haunted mansions, baroque gates, creaking doors and other kinds of uninviting openings, spider webs and so forth: this is the material the phantasy draws in in order to sustain the staging of non-reproductive sexuality, to both indulge in the longing for and cast off the unpredictable and unknowable consequences of such 'excess'. It is precisely the staging of such excess that marked the relegation of the Ramsay's films to the margin of the industry.

We now have a set of interconnecting terms, each placed along two axes, one narrative (female sexuality) the other industrial (market position), with the gothic as a function of the resulting force-field. One way to test systematically these terms and their interconnections is Algirdas Greimas' semiotic square. In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric

Jameson applied Greimas' square to map 'the semantic and ideological intricacies' of literary texts, their blindspots and 'the limits of a specific ideological consciousness' (Jameson, 1981, p. 47). My suggestion, in line with Jameson's operation in the same volume, is that Greimas' square can just as productively be used to map generic fields by drawing into the equation also nodal points that are extra-textual, that is, part of what Louis Hjelmslev (1961) calls the form and substance of 'expression'. [3]

Central to Greimas' square is the nature of the relation between the terms: negation or contrary (S1 and ~S1), opposition or contradictory (S1 and S2), implication (S2 and ~S1) (Figure 1). The important point is to distinguish between negation (or contradictory) and opposition (or contrary). In negation ~S1 stands for everything that S1 is minus S1's defining characteristic (as in 'here' and 'not here', Figure 2). In turn ~S1 generates (implies) the positive term S2 ('there'), which is in opposition (contrary) to S1.

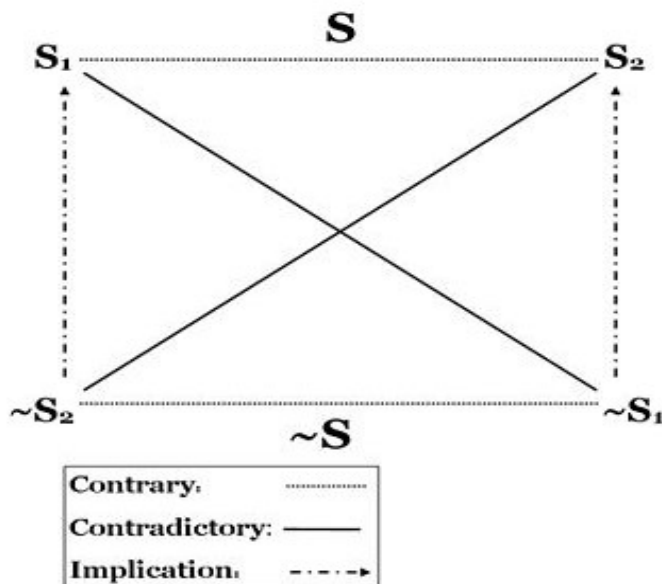Figure 1: Greimas' semiotic square (Greimas, 1987, p. 49)

S1
here ·· there
~S2   S2

not there ·· not here
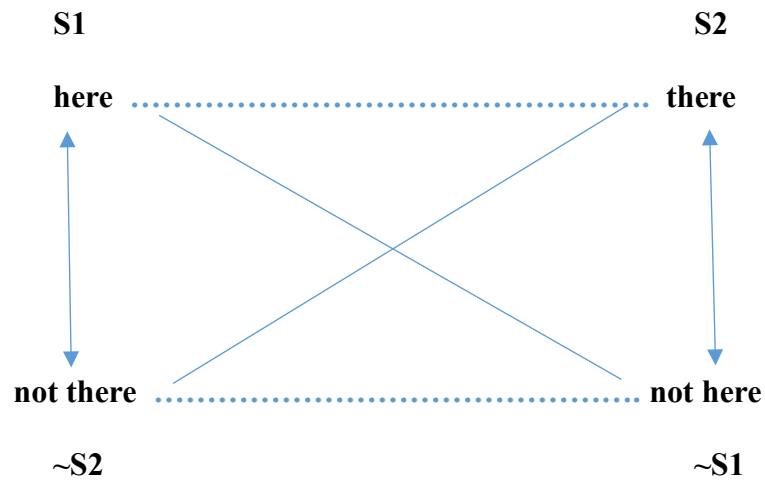
~S2   ~S1

Figure 2: Relations of contraries (negation), contradictories (opposition) and implication.

If we take the gothic in Hindi horror cinema to be a function or effect of the considerations we have discussed so far, with Greimas we arrive at the following:

S1   S2

Non-reproductive Sex ·· Mainstream

Gothic

B&C Circuit ·· Family Romance

(Non-mainstream)   (Reproductive Sex)
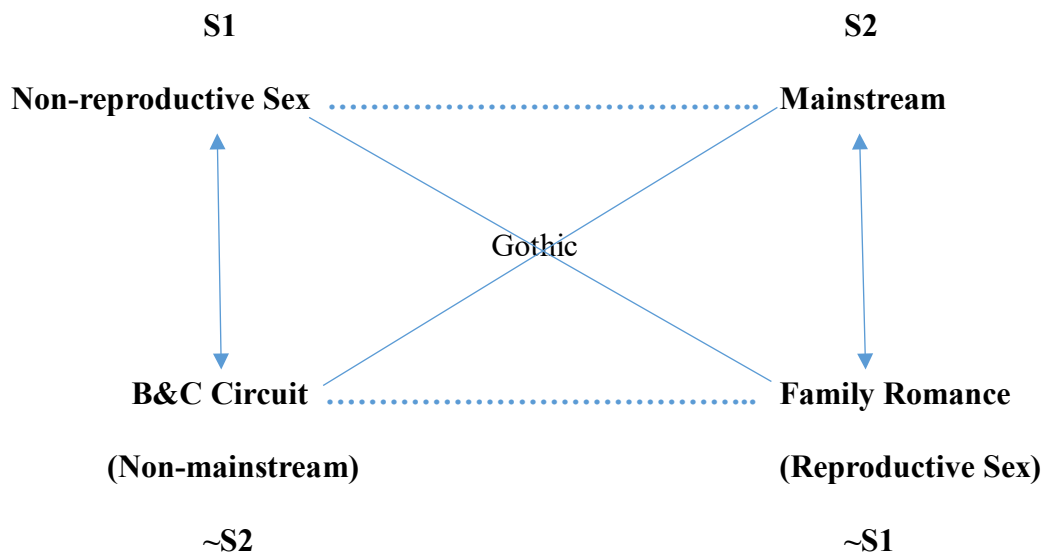
~S2   ~S1

Figure 3: Application of Greimas' semiotic square to Hindi horror cinema

Two (diagonal) axes, one based on a recurring narrative trope (reproductive and non-reproductive sex), the other based on film-industrial dynamics (mainstream and non-mainstream), each producing four vectors that pull films into different narrative modulations and industry positions (Figure 3). I have placed the gothic at the centre of the square to signal that films will feature gothic elements in various gradations depending on their location within the square, the push-and-pull that draws them either towards the mainstream or the B&C circuit, family romance or un-channelled sexuality and desire, as in pornography.[4]

The Gothic Ingredient in Hindi Horror Cinema

Based on our semiotic square, and as any film distributor would confirm, the closer a film is to the B&C circuit, the less the need to inhibit or censor the representation of non-reproductive sexuality. Kanti Shah's films are a good example. They are films that let it all hang out, as it were; sexuality is neither channelled into a sanctioned reproductive framework like the family nor is it suppressed (Sen, A., 2011). If anything, representation of 'illicit' sexuality constitutes if not the sole (nor explicit) selling point of Shah's films, certainly the main one. Budgets are consequentially at rock bottom and exhibition totally confined to B&C circuit. Nor is energy or money invested in gothic *mises en scène*. What effect there is – frontal pantomime-like tableaux devoid of spectacularity – is very basic and barely pays lip service to horror cinema, just enough to entice spectators interested in, perhaps, Ramsay and other horror fare, more likely in seeking out apologetically a space where tits and bums are all is needed. Compare this to *Mahal*, which is at the diametrically opposite end of our semiotic square and which is eminently gothic because while featuring high degrees of non-reproductive sexuality is also at the same time firmly placed in the industry's centre-ground.

Kanti Shah's films and *Mahal* are two extremes. A more nuanced case is Ramgopal Varma's *Raat* (1992), a film that prematurely augured the breakthrough of horror cinema into the Hindi mainstream. *Raat* centres on a nuclear family within which the only smattering of non-reproductive sexuality stems from Minnie (Revathy), the teenage daughter whose picnic with the boyfriend comes to an end before it even starts when the lad's motorbike is punctured. Left waiting at the roadside Minnie is promptly possessed by the invisible vengeful spirit of a brutally murdered woman. Found to reside under the family house, in a cellar that looks like a giant vagina, the female spirit is finally dispatched by a Hindu exorcist (Om Puri): Sharji presses on a spot on the spirit's head until the poor thing disintegrates into a smudge of white slime. There are no images of nudity or sexuality as such throughout *Raat*, as it befits a production intended for the mainstream. Whatever sexuality there is, has been displaced onto innocent-looking props (the punctured tyre, cellar, spot and slime) that are confined to the film's last seven minutes, the exorcism. This is the only sequence offering if not a semblance of gothic atmosphere at least a sense of the monstrous. For the preceding two hours *Raat* could just as well have been a family romance. Made twenty years later, Reema Kagti's *Talaash* falls into the same category: what non-reproductive female sexuality there may have been is kept safely off-screen, enabling the film to move firmly within the A circuit but also depriving it of gothic elements entirely.

Ramgopal Varma's films are premised on a sturdy sense of realism. The boundary between what is real and what is not is clear-cut, an effect of the channelled, reproductive nature of the films' sexual content. No need here for defence mechanisms; all is as it should be. *Raat* seems incapable of letting any sense of excess linger into the *mise en scène* and, confounding reality and fantasy, of luring the spectator's gaze onto the socially impermissible. The monstrous is thus restricted to the very end, when it is purged, while the special effects are polished enough to look distinctly otherworldly, pre-empting the risk of

any slurring of one world into the other. A comparative example is Vikram Bhatt's *1920* (2008). Available on Netflix and to that extend subject to the demands the mainstream imposes on a film's representation of sexuality, *1920* opens with a grandly gothic pre-titles sequence set in the 1920s: an architect called to restore a colonial mansion is killed by an unseen force. Some time goes by and another architect, Arjun (Rajniesh Duggall), a devout Hindu, abandons Hinduism to marry Lisa (Adah Sharma), a Catholic woman. Lisa will pay for that. As the young couple move into the (curiously devoid of spider webs and dust) gothic mansion for Arjun to work on his commission to transform it into a hotel, Lisa becomes possessed by the spirit of an Indian soldier who, having betrayed the nationalists during the Sepoy rebellion, was in turn betrayed by Gayatri (Anjori Alagh), the mistress of the house at the time, who seduced him to lure him into a trap and thus save Indian nationalism. Along the way the film's gothic atmosphere, arguably linked to the corrupting sexuality of the Catholic Lisa, fizzles out, to be replaced by a nationalist saga. The possession of Lisa's body by the soldier escalates, leading her to all sorts of mischievous tricks, but Lisa herself is eventually absorbed into the persona of the sacrificial mistress of the house, whose reluctant sexuality, unlike Lisa's, was expended for the right cause. Because, when all seems lost, Arjun comes to the realisation that the only way to save Lisa is to reembrace Hanuman, emblem of a virulent form of Hinduism, and to recite a prayer to the monkey-god while manhandling the hapless Lisa. This ritual, which enables Arjun to regain control of his unruly wife, is played out during the closing sequence, a barely disguised brutal rape. There is, however, no sexual imagery as such here and thus no need to infuse the sequence with compensatory defence mechanisms. As in *Raat* the supernatural, indeed, the religious, is tagged on at the end, to legitimate the violence proffered on the Catholic woman, and, with her purification, to restore order.

I have already discussed the relation between gothic elements and images of non-reproductive female sexuality in the Ramsay brothers. What remains to be added concerns the Ramsay's fluctuating position along the industrial axis of our semiotic square. Close scrutiny of *Trade Guide* magazine indicates that the Ramsay's place in the industry changed over the years. While early productions like *Dashat* (1981) and *Sannata* (1981) do not seem to have been released outside the Delhi-UP circuit, at least initially, from *Hotel* (1981) onwards the Ramsay's reach expanded. *Hotel* was the first film they produced with an outsider, Harish Shah, who had connections with good distributors. Featuring A-Grade actors (Dasgupta, 2017, p. 63), *Hotel* opened first in Bangalore and Baroda and then in Bombay city and suburbs.[5] *Hotel* also made good money, as did *Purana Mandir*, the brothers' biggest hit – released across Delhi to full houses, elsewhere in UP circuit and in Calcutta, and *Tahkhana* (*Dungeon*, 1986) – which played to full houses in Delhi, UP, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Calcutta. *Veerana* too, released two years later, circulated widely – opening first in Delhi, Punjab and Calcutta and then in Bombay, as did *Bandh Darwaza* (*The Closed Door*, 1990).

These years mark the golden age of the Ramsay banner, their presence eventually beginning to rarefy not long after the television series *The Zee Horror Show*. Nor is the distribution data above meant to suggest that the Ramsay were about to break into the mainstream. But it does show that the brothers were miles ahead of generically similar products, such as Vinod Talwar's *Hatyarin* or Mohan Bhakri's films. For instance, Bhakri's *Khooni Mahal* (*Bloody Mansion*, 1987) was released at the same time as Tulsi and Shyam Ramsay's *Dak Bangla* (*Rest House*, 1987). While the first opened initially only in Delhi and UP, the latter opened simultaneously in Bombay, Delhi, Punjab, Calcutta and the South circuit. The two films stayed on the bill for (at least) three weeks, but whereas *Dak Bangla* stayed on in each of these locations throughout, *Khooni Mahal*, perhaps with less prints in circulation, moved, leaving Delhi and UP after two weeks to reach only then Bombay, Punjab

and the South, most likely on the back of the Ramsay's trail. Compare also with Kanti Shah's *Darwaza* (*The Door*, 2002), which opened at the end of September in two cinemas in Ludhiana (East Punjab) but nowhere else, to disappear the following two weeks and resurface in mid-October in Ahmedabad though nowhere else, again for one week only. That same week Vikram Bhatt's *Raaz* was on its fortieth (week), while Deepak cinema in Bhavnagar (Gujarat) was holding three daily shows of *Purana Mandir*, clearly a favourite rerun.

In October 1984 *Film Information* run an article on piracy and video parlours. Accompanying it is a photograph of policemen raiding a parlour and confiscating a VHS of *Purana Mandir* (pp. 13–15). This is followed by another article whose author, V.P. Sathe, observes:

> Last week – which was pre-Diwali week, two new films were released in Bombay, viz. *Zakhmi Sher* and *Purana Mandir*. I was surprised to find a non-star cast horror adult film like *Purana Mandir* being released in as many as twenty-three theatres. And at most of the theatres the picture drew full houses. (1984, p. 21)

This and the piracy problem are, Sathe argues, effects of an industry in crisis – a crisis that he sums up this way:

> The great paradox of the film industry situation today is that in spite of fall in collections and record number of flops at the box office the production has not gone down. On the contrary, the production has gone up. The more flops we appear to make the more pictures we appear to be producing. (p. 21)

Whether this was actually a crisis or a long-term condition is something I return below. Here two considerations in the light of Sathe's comments. The first is that in an industrial context characterised by overproduction of low or no profit-gearing films *Purana Mandir* represented a short-term solution. The cheaply made, most likely cheap to rent Ramsay film was intended for a niche market, but as an unexpected and widely popular sensation it also met exhibitors' needs elsewhere, including city centre cinemas (especially around Diwali). Second, Sathe confirms that, as distribution data also shows, the Ramsay's horror film's position in the industry, over time, changed: from a suburban marginal occurrence to, however temporarily, a central player of a potentially growing niche market, to, a few years later, a cult phenomenon with a long shelf life. Add to this the Ramsay's operation across diverse outlets, from cinemas to (legal and illegal) video parlours, television, satellite and VCD/DVDs – though not, significantly, international streaming.

This capacity – a necessity – to move to and fro between the industry's two poles, the mainstream and the B&C circuit, without being quite permanently in one or the other camp, has made it possible for the Ramsay brothers to create *mises en scène* in which imagination and reality, fantasy and the material world blur, not least because of the unpolished, worldly nature of the effects deployed. I use 'worldly' here both in the sense of somewhat basic (though not as basic as in Kanti Shah) and to remind ourselves that the Ramsay's range is syncretic and fundamentally secular (a far cry from the polished, rampantly Hinduist choices of *1920*).[6] The atmosphere these effects conjure is gothic or at any rate *unheimlich* because it is activated by the breaking of the unnatural and horrid into a world that is very ordinary indeed. Everything about the art direction, sets, costumes and locations in the Ramsay's films is average. Even the haunted mansions are never quite extraordinary enough to look anything but familiar and domestic. In this world the fantasy of non-reproductive female sexuality that surfaces in saturated gothic *mises en scène*, its brushing against softcore pornography while,

at the same time, staying well away from it, is itself a dimension of that ordinariness. What could be more mundane than the mandatory shower scene? If so, then in the Ramsay's films the gothic is not just a sales point or a defence, but also a mechanism of equilibrium. Neither reducible to pornography nor to family romances, excluded from the mainstream yet not easily relegated to the B&C circuit, the Ramsay's gothic *mises en scène* keep these films somewhere in suspension, in an unstable balance near the centre of our semiotic square. Perhaps this is also how the gothic functions in most of Hindi cinema.

I want to conclude this series of reflections on the function of the gothic in Hindi horror cinema with a film that is, in my opinion, right down the Ramsay's alley. The film is *Ghost*, directed by Puja Jatinter Bedi and, as the first title tells us, a Bharat Shah production (Figure 4), the leading diamond merchant, real-estate investor and 'part-time' film financier arrested in 2001 for his connections with the Dubai-based gangster Chhota Shakeel. Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2014) has argued that there is little new in the Hindi cinema's deceptive incapacity to generate income. What needs to be taken into account, rather, are the industry's horizontal and tightknit connections with ancillary, largely below the radar and, often these days, criminal economies. Bharat Shah, one of the financier at the centre of these links, has tended to greenlight independent productions and to use stars as

> a primary means to trigger (…) [the] shift of emphasis away from the box-office and towards generating, on behalf of his shadowy Dubai-based investors, a growing number of secondary or subsidiary domains of value generation. (Rajadyaksha, 2014, p. 14)

Figure 4: Film grab from title sequence of *Ghost* (Puja Jatinder Bedi, 2012)

As if on cue, the production of *Ghost* and its promotion was hampered by the scandal that engulfed its popular male lead, Shiney Ahuja. In a country where rape investigations rarely come to trial, let alone conviction, in March 2011, when *Ghost* went into (or was already in) production, Ahuja was tried for rape charges and sent to jail for seven years. Add to this the films unorthodox use of religious iconography and splatter imagery, which earned *Ghost* severe cuts by the censors. All helped put *Ghost* in the headlines beyond its media partner's – Khar-based Hair and Skin Clinic Berkowits (*CineCurry*, 2012) – wildest expectations. For her part Puja Jatinder Bedi proudly announced that, Ahuja's arrest and censorship notwithstanding (or perhaps because of it), *Ghost* could count on a large female following. She then went on to claim that the horror sequences, including the material censored, were directly inspired by her own dreams, by things about which 'she could not think or write but which she could see' (Indo-Asia Service, 2011).

To return to our semiotic square, it is not difficult to identify *Ghost* as a film that is fully immersed in the impermissible, largely by necessity, as the circumstances above suggest, and at considerable remove from the glossier *Raat* and *1920*. *Ghost*'s story is of Dr Suhani (Sayali Bhagat) an attractive woman doctor and devout Catholic, and Vijay (Shiney

Ahuja), a detective, who, investigating brutal deaths and paranormal events at the city hospital, finds them to be caused by the vengeful spirit of Mary, an Australian woman who was brutally assaulted, raped, crucified and left for dead, all for falling in love with a Hindu man. We learn that, taken to the hospital, Mary is declared dead but her heart continued beating. Baffled, the doctors decide that the best course of action is to chop her body into pieces and toss them into the sea. It turns out that the object of Mary's love was none other than detective Vijay himself, gone amnesic after the attack that had been orchestrated by Vijay's father because he disapproved of the couple's intercommunal relationship. Throughout the film philandering or abusive men die gruesome deaths at the hand of a monstrous, ghostly witch, only to be taken 'all the way to hell' to be 'thrown in the blazing furnace' by a figure claiming to be 'Evil'. Unlike Lisa in *1920* or the nameless female spirit in *Raat*, in *Ghost* Mary's macabre spirit has the final say.

The perceived excess of non-reproductive female sexuality looms large across the film, and not only in the story. *Ghost* stands out for its highly saturated modern gothic imagery, a vibrantly colourful lighting palette and a syncretic use of horror, folk and religious iconography, some of it quite imaginatively used but for which it was made to pay. The debut film of a woman director in a cinema where horror has been historically a marginal genre and in which women get to work behind the camera only if they are born or married into the industry, *Ghost* works with sensational, contentious ingredients both as an artefact and as a commodity. It is, in all respects, a child of what elsewhere I have called 'radical capital' (Vitali, 2016, pp. 20–1). From this *Ghost*'s emphatic deployment of anything that may pass for extreme gothic, along with the low production value of such gothic effects. Everything in it, as in Ramsay's productions, is simultaneously overly domestic and grotesquely, violently weird. Indeed, in moments judged too disturbing to look at negative photography is used, as if to signal in quite literal a way that we are looking at the reverse side of reality.

Conclusion: 'The Mood of Another Time, Another Place'

Like many of its gothic predecessors and unlike sleeker, more expensive yet hardly gothic Hindi horror films, *Ghost* was dismissed, disparaged for its low production values and/or its 'incoherent' narrative, as if aesthetic value and market value could be interchangeable, or, for that matter, narrative ever said to be 'coherent'. The fact is, *Ghost* is an eminently modern gothic text and, what is more, a text whose gothic imagery stands out, by necessity, as fiercely in conflict with dominant discourses in/of contemporary India. Its flaunting of female sexuality, the gaudy display of ripped human flesh and rotting bodies, the syncretic exploitation of religious iconography for sensational effect and, above all, the emphatic proposition that a woman's dreams of active aggression against abusive men are worthy of representation for mass circulation all fly in the face of genteel #MeToo indignation as much as of prevailing male chauvinism. History, Fredric Jameson famously reminded us, is 'the experience of Necessity',

> and it is this alone which can forestall its … reification as a mere object of representation (...) Necessity is not in that sense a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events; it is therefore a narrative category. (1981, p. 102)

I like to think that the gothic forms which disturbing content takes in *Ghost* (and in some other but not in all Hindi horror films) are such a narrative category: the form events take when history is experienced as necessity and thus, inevitably – to paraphrase Dorothea Tanning – another time or place that cannot 'be known about' may be only dimly longed for, obscurely visualised. If we accept, as Jameson's reminder invites us to do, that *Ghost*, like

any other socially symbolic act, narrativises its conditions of existence, its and our moment in/of history, then we would do well to take its gothic imagery very seriously and ask ourselves: what are the utopian dimensions of such imagery? Which horizons do contemporary Hindi gothic horror films play out that are repressed in the reality of (post)modern India?

References

Amrohi, K. (1949) *Mahal*.

Austen, J. (1972) *Northanger Abbey*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Bedekar, V. (1970) *Ek Nanhi Munni Ladki Thi*.

Bhakri, M. (1985) *Cheekh*.

Bhakri, M. (1987) *Khooni Mahal*.

Bhatt, V (2008) *1920*.

Bhatt, V. (2002) *Raaz*.

Bigsby C.W.B. (1987). Gothic. In: R. Fowler, ed. *A dictionary of modern critical terms*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 105–6.

CineCurry. (2012). 12 January. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iEifzvwAUA> [Accessed 31 October 2019].

Dasgupta, S. (2017). *Don't disturb the dead: The story of the Ramsay Brothers*. Noida: HarperCollins.

Dwyer, R. (2011). Bombay gothic: On the 60th anniversary of Kamal Amrohi's *Mahal*. In: R. Dwyer and J. Pinto, eds. *Beyond the boundaries of Bollywood: The many forms of Hindi cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 130–55.

Film Information. (1984). Scare among pirates: 7 raids in 5 days: Piracy being wiped out. 1984. 27 October, pp. 13–15.

Gledhill, C. (2000). Rethinking genre. In: C. Gledhill and L. Williams, eds. *Reinventing film studies*. London: Arnold; New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 221–43.

Greimas, A.J. (1987). The interaction of semiotic constraints. In: A.J. Greimas, *On meaning: selected writings in semiotic theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 48-62.

Hjelmslev, L. (1961). *Prolegomena to a theory of language*. Translated by F.J. Whitfield. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press

Indo-Asia News Service. (2011). Puja Bedi says *Ghost* film consists of scenes from my dreams. *The Bollywood Show*, Available at <https://www.dailymotion.com/ video/xm8cn6> [Accessed 31 October 2019].

Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*. London: Routledge.

Jatinder Bedi, P. (2012) *Ghost.*

Kagti, R. (2012) *Talaash.*

Khosla, R. (1964) *Woh Kaun Thi?*

Laplanche, J. and Pontalis, J. (1973). *The language of psycho-analysis*. Translated by D. Nicholson-Smith. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

Rajadhyaksha, A. (2014). The guilty secret: The latter career of the Bollywood's illegitimacy. *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series*, 230. Singapore: Asia Research Institute, National University Singapore. Available at <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/ wps/wps14_230.pdf> [Accessed 30 October 2019].

Ramsay, T. and S. (1972) *Do Gaz Zameen ke Neeche.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1981) *Dashat.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1981) *Hotel.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1981) *Sannata.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1984) *Purana Mandir.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1986) *Tahkhana.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1987) *Dak Bangla.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1988) *Veerana.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1990) *Bandh Darwaza.*

Ramsay, T. and S. (1993-1997) *The Zee Horror Show.*

Roy, B. (1958) *Madhumati.*

Sathe, V.P. (1984). Looking back – looking ahead: The paradoxical situation. *Film
Information*, 27 October, p. 21.

Sen, A. (2011). 'I wasn't born with enough middle fingers': How low-budget horror films
defy sexual morality and heteronormativity in Bollywood. *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*,
12(2), pp. 75–90.

Sen, M. (2017). *Haunting Bollywood: Gender, genre, and the supernatural in Hindi
commercial cinema*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017.

Shah, K. (2002) *Darwaza.*

Shah, K. (2002) *Khooni Shaitan.*

Singh, B. (2008). *Aadamkhor Haseena (The Man-Eating Beauty)* and the anthropology of a
moment. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 42(2), pp. 249–79.

Singh, D. (2013) *Rise of the Zombie.*

Srinivas, S. V. (2003). Hong Kong action film in the Indian B circuit. *Inter-Asia Cultural
Studies*, 4(1), pp. 40–61.

Talwar, V. (1991) *Hatyarin.*

Tanning, D. (1989). Dorothea Tanning: interview with Roland Hagenberg. *Art of Russia and
the West*, 1, p. 31.

Trade Guide (1981-2002).

Varma, R. (1992) *Raat.*

Vitali, V. (2011). The evil I: realism and scopophilia in the horror films of the Ramsay
      brothers. In: R. Dwyer and J. Pinto, eds. *Beyond the boundaries of Bollywood: The*
      many forms of Hindi cinema. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 77–101.

Vitali, V. (2016). *Capital and popular cinema: The dollars are coming!* Manchester:
      Manchester University Press.

---

[1] In *Northanger Abbey* Catherine asks of the then fashionable Gothic novels Isabella

recommends: 'but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?' (Austen, 1972, p. 61).

[2] For the reasons why this is considered the first Hindi horror film, see Vitali (2011 and

2016). The difference between earlier films that contained horror or gothic elements and the

Ramsay brothers' productions is that the latter were built entirely on the horror ingredient and

sold explicitly as horror films.

[3] Form and substance of expression here refer to Louis Hjelmslev's (1961) theory of the

dimensions of speech. Thus Fredric Jameson: 'In [Hjelmslev's] generic model (…) the

relationship of the (…) historical situation to the text is not construed as causal (however that

might be imagined) but rather as one of a limiting situation; the historical moment is (…)

understood to block off or shut down a certain number of formal possibilities available

before, and to open up determinate new ones, which may or may not ever be realized in

artistic practice. [Hjelmslev] aims not at enumerating the "causes" of a given text or form, but

rather at mapping out its objective, a priori conditions of possibility, which is quite a different

matter' (Jameson, 1981, p. 148).

[4] S.V. Srinivas and Bhrigupati Singh defined the B circuit in India as 'that segment of

distribution and exhibition sectors that is characterized by low levels of investments [and]

repeated interventions by both distributors and exhibitors, which result in the de-standardization of a film's status as an industrial product (…) cheap new films (…) or re-runs' (Srinivas, 2003, p. 49), and the C-circuit as 'foreign or indigenous soft-porn usually screened in the morning slot' (Singh, 2008, p. 250), generally of neighbourhood, suburban or run-down cinemas.

[5] All distribution information in this and the following paragraphs is from *Trade Guide* and based on original research. I would like to thank the University of East London for partly funding my research.

[6] On this aspect of the Ramsay's films, see Vitali (2016, pp. 135–41).