CHAPTER 3

VISUALIZING THE URBAN CROWD

POLITICAL SPECTATORSHIP IN THE AGE OF CINEMA

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People done too much damage to Trams by standing on it.Here is a picture excited crowd watching the Gharwal day procession.

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One of the key markers of Bombay's conspicuous modernity in the 1930s was the urban crowd, strategically and differentially named as "crowd," "mass," or "public" depending on who was doing the naming. These emerging urban collectivities signalled both promise and danger for a range of city elites. The colonial administration strictly surveilled anticolonial protests, while local Indian capitalists were unnerved by waves of labour mobilizations. At the same time, nationalist political parties pivoted towards new voter and supporter constituencies. Focused on the mass political mobilizations of the Civil Disobedience era, the Nursey album foregrounds and names some of the political protagonists of the time: new social and historical figures such as "agitators," "volunteers" and "party workers." To this mix I add a fourth term based on a recurring activity seen in the album—"spectating," done by "spectators"—i.e., those who watch, witness and are moved by what they see. These are not "political" actors in the usual sense of the word—many just happened to be there as disinterested bystanders, others were curious onlookers, and still others were sympathetic witnesses not yet ready to sign up as "party workers."

In this brief essay I set up a dialogue between the Nursey album and histories of cinemagoing in 1930s Bombay in order to situate mass spectatorship as a central catalyst for mass politics in the modern city, be it in movie theatres or in the streets.

Crowd Politics

The Nursey album is a testament to its immediate place of production—Bombay city—but also to a wider transformation in the visual public sphere across cities of the East and West. By the late 1920s, media forms such as the illustrated newspaper, weekly and monthly magazines (be they film magazines, science magazines or political publications) and cinema had entered headfirst into a vexed conjuncture of mass politics and agitational movements across the interwar world. We can say that the new media of the 20th century—shuttling between the heady pull of socialism in Eastern Europe, Russia and China; the capitalist euphoria of the United States' "Roaring Twenties" alongside factory strikes; and strident anticolonial movements across Asia, Africa and Latin America—were called forth by the actions of emerging political collectives, even

PAGES 78–79
"Picketers requesting the voters not to vote." c. 1930–1931
Gelatin Silver Print, 116 x 158 mm
ACP: 98.77.0002 (73a)

PAGE 80
"Dr Ansaria taken in procession on his arrival in Bombay. Photo shows the procession at V.T."
(Detail, see p. 86)

Fig. 3.1
"People done too much damage to Tram by standing on it. Here is a picture [of an] excited crowd watching the Gharwal day procession."
c. 1930–1931
Gelatin Silver Print, 117 x 156 mm
ACP: 98.77.0002 (31a)

as these new media were pressed into the urgent task of documenting the very same publics. To understand this better, we first have to understand the palpable sense of fear and excitement surrounding the emergence of the urban crowd, or what I wish to call the "collective."

Let us turn to the case of Weimar Germany, the field site for some of the most enduring theorizations of crowds and masses. Stefan Jonsson identifies an interwar German fixation with the masses, and locates this fixation in two main areas: politics, where there was an urgent need to imagine a post-imperial German nation amid tense oppositional currents; and culture, where the rapid growth of an urban proletariat paralleled the emergence of mass media. It was becoming increasing clear to observers that "power was from now on linked to mass mobilization" and that modern mass media like newspapers and cinema would be key vehicles for this mobilization.[1] The photographic image "was believed to possess unique and advantageous properties for instruction and propaganda, all the more so if one wanted to reach an audience with poor education and literacy."[2] Therefore, illustrated newspapers and magazines were the hot new media of the day. This is very similar to the situation in South Asia. Sumit Sarkar has argued that as early as the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal in 1905, "techniques of mass contact" such as "the press and the platform" broadened the scope and address of the nationalist movement, turning the tenor of anticolonial agitation away from the standard mode of petitioning the government, and instead orienting towards the public in "a new creed of radical nationalism."[3] Bombay's nationalist illustrated newspapers, such as *The Bombay Chronicle*, took up this line of politics, using photographs to document colonial violence as well as anticolonial protest, making a visceral appeal to the reader-viewer's emotions.

The Nursey album centres this mode of news photograph, one that visually chronicles both protest and punishment. Figures 3.2a and 3.2b are exemplars of what can be identified as an emerging genre of political news photography—the *lathi*-charge photo—in which the photographer documents police violence against a crowd of protesters, also chronicling the aftermath.[4] We see the *lathi*-charge photo feature repeatedly in *The Bombay Chronicle*, often in a documentary series, as a sequenced testimonial that starts from the site of attack, moves on to the administration of medical aid, and ends with photographs of injured volunteers proudly posing with their bandages as they might with medals for bravery.[5] Note that the *lathi* charge is a form of *crowd control*, albeit a violent one. It cannot be deployed against solitary individuals but needs a confrontational mass of bodies in order to be effective and justifiable. Ironically, the same *lathi*-charge photos that were read as patriotic protest in Indian newspapers were interpreted as laudable examples of British law and order in venues such as *The Illustrated London News*.[6] These

Fig. 3.2a
"A police officer thrashing a volunteers [volunteer] outside the high court." c. 1930–1931
Gelatin Silver Print, 114 x 161 mm
ACP: 98.77.0002 (89b)

Fig. 3.2b
"Congress volunteers giving first aid to the wounded from lathi blows." c. 1930–1931
Gelatin Silver Print, 114 x 157 mm
ACP: 98.77.0002 (37a)

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Fig. 3.3
"Dr Ansaria taken in procession on his arrival in Bombay. Photo shows the procession at V.T."
c. 1930–1931
Gelatin Silver Print,
114 x 165 mm
ACP: 98.77.0002 (28a)

contradictory uses point to the intense struggle over images that marked this period, as new forms of mass media joined with new forms of collective mobilization.

Jim Masselos has studied the forms and methods of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Bombay in 1930–31 in terms of techniques of crowd mobilization.[7] He points to the very controlled manner in which the Congress staged daily ritualized public performances—starting with the march to collect salt from the seashore in the morning, to the rousing speeches in the evening, all punctuated through the day by *prabhat pheris*, *lathi* charges and endless processions.[8] All of these tactical forms depended critically on the crowd, the large numbers of what Masselos calls "actors and audience"—where Congress workers and volunteers are the actors, while the "spectating" onlookers, both random and purposive, might be called the "audience."

This audience is interesting to me because it lends itself to many roles in the historical narrative and is not easily definable. The success of the Civil

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Disobedience Movement depended on the ability of the Congress to mobilize supporters towards the political horizon of *purna swaraj* (total self-government). Each of the tactical political events produced and performed by the Congress depended on watchers and witnesses, those large numbers of people who showed up to observe, cheer or spontaneously join in the drama of nationalism. Masselos describes the "monster meetings" that took place every day in Bombay, and the Nursey album helps us visualize them (Fig. 3.3). What I wish to highlight is that such spectacular crowds are not simply a fallout of modern urban political events, but their very goal. These are "spectacles of presence,"to cite Nusrat Chowdhry,[9] and they evidence the political potentialities of the collective.

It has been argued that there were certain pre-existing particularities in Bombay city that were conducive to this form of public watching, gathering and walking. Masselos points to religious practices that utilized the cityscape as a venue, demonstrating the simultaneous private-public nature of religious festivals such as Ganpati or Muharram processions. Some of these, especially Muharram, were frequently marked by police presence and surveillance. There is a suggestion here that the crowd watching the religious procession is not only affectively mobilized by the spectacle, but also politically interpellated as oppositional to a governmental/colonial authority. What I would like to add to the list of the particular conditions that made Bombay city a prime venue for mass politics is the historical fact of cinema and the city as a cine-ecology.[10] As an art form and a social space, cinema was becoming a conspicuous presence in the city and was also being tested as a venue for political contestation.

Seeing like a Collective

For more than two decades, the India Office in London had been petitioned by angry film viewers, religious leaders, journalists and politicians who objected to sensitive content in both Indian and foreign films, and by those who sought the proscription of films that were racially or religiously offensive to Indians. By the late 1930s, a vibrant and heterogeneous film audience was in place, one that recognized the social effects of mass media and treated cinema as a site of political protest.[11] At the same time, bourgeois anxieties about unruly audiences who could be instigated by nationalist, anti-capitalist or anti-racist film messaging overlapped with anxieties about workers' unions, urban Muslim youth and the middle-class working woman. Let us consider an example from this decade as illustration.

In 1934, a highly anticipated film titled *The Mill* or *Mazdoor* (trans. Worker) was made in Bombay, scripted by the acclaimed Hindi novelist Premchand and directed by Mohan Bhavnani, a veteran filmmaker. *The Mill*'s plot was extremely topical: a love story between a millowner's daughter and a trade union leader, which presented a romantic solution to Bombay's decades-long labour agitations

against the powerful textile industry. An added attraction of the film was the fact that it was shot on-location at Bombay's Hansraj textile mill and promised realistic footage of workers' rallies and strikes. However, *The Mill* was immediately proscribed and the filmmakers were subjected to a five-year-long battle with the censors. The main fear was that because it graphically depicted violent proletarian resistance to capitalist exploitation, the film would cause unrest in the city. The censor's paper trail reveals some locational specificities of Bombay city that caused these acute apprehensions—its changing demographics as the foremost centre of trade and industry in the region, its status as the centre for Communist Party activities, and its reputation as a city of strikes—all of which were only possible because of the emergence of a new historical figure with a reflexive class consciousness, the *girni kaamgaar*, or more broadly, the *mazdoor*.[12]

Statistics from this period show that Bombay audiences constituted a big chunk of who was watching Bombay films, with a 33–47% share in nationwide theatrical revenues.[13] This local film viewership depended heavily on working-class audiences solicited in theatres built in cotton-mill neighbourhoods. *The Mill*'s censors were therefore not simply speculating about an imagined working-class audience, they were also envisioning the actually existing proletarian film publics of Bombay who seemed ripe for radical socialist messaging. I suggest that the rise of Bombay's mills and the new-media context of rapid mass reproduction and dissemination historically converged to produce a "perceptual machinery of the collective"[14] wherein visual technologies such as photography and cinema

Fig. 3.4
Cover of a song booklet for *The Mill/ Mazdoor* (1934), directed by Mohan Bhavnani. Image courtesy: National Film Archive of India, Pune

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were rapidly enlisted to *address* the collective and, at the same time, *represent* the collective. Cinema in Bombay at this time thus rose to the occasion and visualized the new proletarian collective, romantically individualized into the icon of the *mazdoor*. But, and this is important, cinema also provided the perceptual training of *seeing like a collective*. As the urban masses gathered in the darkened anonymity of a movie hall, they were sensorially trained in the perceptual art of seeing like a collective—gasping, laughing, cheering, crying in a shared affective moment. This mass affect, produced by the movies, had the potential to incite as much as to educate, and elite interests recognized this ambivalent potential almost immediately.

My argument is that the spectating crowds we see in the Nursey album are oriented towards the compelling scenography of outdoor street rallies and political processions in a way that is similar to their orientation towards the filmic image inside the movie theatre. There is a direct overlap between the demographics that would throng a film screening and those who crowded the streets as loiterers, workers, vendors, shoppers or commuters. The screen calls a collective into being by addressing strangers and drawing them into a shared embodied experience. The political procession or other protest spectacles from the 1930s similarly craft a public out of the amorphous crowd. Like the rally-watcher, the moviegoer intuits, quite viscerally, that a group affect has been created by the spectacle, a kind of energetic pact that pulls the individual out of solipsism and into the collective.

The curious onlookers we see in the Nursey album further exemplify the cinematic mode of distracted viewing that was characteristic of the moviegoing experience at the time, and cyclically drew on the distracted gaze that marks the urban sensorium.[15] Whether in a built theatre in Grant Road or a temporary screening tent in a maidan, cinema was a noisy social space of distracted viewing with hawkers, film narrators and jokesters competing for attention. The screen, like the rally, gathers bodies into a shared space, but it cannot fully control the multiple meanings that will be made from the experience. In the streets of Bombay in 1930, the spectating crowds watched political protests with a mix of curiosity, thrill and indifference, or simply to pass the time. It is neither necessary nor possible for us to ascertain whether they "got the message" or not, or whether they were engaged, attentive viewers. The noteworthy point is that these bodies were physically drawn into an anticolonial geography that was temporarily produced in the triangulation of public space, crowds and political performance. The rally, like the movie, produced a social space, and this spatial production (or appropriation) is a "condition of possibility for the crowd's assumption of a political role ...."[16]

In Figure 3.5, we see an orderly procession of Congress workers—men, women and children—as they walk down a busy market area wearing their

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Fig. 3.5
"A boycott procession in the market area."
c. 1930–1931
Gelatin Silver Print,
115 x 160 mm
ACP: 98.77.0002 (90b)
The circled sections in the photograph reveal shadowy figures on the edges of the rally, spectators on the verge of being swept into the political space of the procession.

white caps and holding hands to redirect the traffic flow. The superimposed circles highlight the barely visible “audience” for this show, hidden in shadowy doorways and overhanging windows, quite like film spectators watching from stalls and balconies. Standing in the literal margins of this photograph and away from its central focus (the political procession), these bystanders are nevertheless a key part of the demonstration. Without their voluntary witnessing and accidental presence, the rally could not be deemed a success in scale. Moreover, an agitational charge is unleashed in a street that is taken over by chanting cadres, and this charge is its own form of political pedagogy. It sensorially introduces onlookers to the language of rights and demands, opens up an imagination that it is possible to enact public opposition to the regime.

Aesthetics and Politics

In a recent book, Francis Cody notes that “the popular phrase ‘media event’ points to the fact that we have long recognized conditions in which events are staged in anticipation of recording by news cameras and reporters.”[17] Undoubtedly, many of the Nursey album photographs were designed to generate a media event through the combination of planned daily practices of mass civil disobedience and strategically placed cameras that documented these staged events. Representationally, these photos were intended to fulfil a political function: to document and disseminate political rallies, but also to intervene in the active erasure or misrepresentation of anticolonial activities in mainstream media, which was a visual mode of political suppression. In response, these images defiantly configure the public spaces of Bombay city as spaces of oppositional politics, framing the varied actors as visibly antagonistic: police versus public, colonial power versus people power, might versus right. But media don’t simply represent events or publics—media such as photography and cinema can materially engineer significant orientations of social relations and attitudes.

It is in the early 1930s that cinema emerged as a conspicuous site for—and subject of—political debate, negotiation and contestation in colonial India. By the late 1930s, a robust anticolonial cultural movement had sprung up against foreign films that displayed a patently racist or imperialist agenda in their depictions of India.[18] Whether we examine the censor’s control of films considered unsuitable in a factory town, or the nationalist Indian’s outrage against racist representation, we are confronted by a widespread belief in the power of cinema to sway hearts and minds. This power was conceived to lie in cinema’s sensory address,the visceral potential of *mise en scène* and spectacle to move audiences into action and agitation. The palpable quality of this power is clear in descriptions of the heavily-censored *The Mill* that was released in 1939. A young socialist Khwaja Ahmad Abbas excitedly wrote, at the time, “Whatever

Fig. 3.6a
Crowds outside the Imperial Cinema in Bombay being surveilled by a police *bundobast* (deployment). Photograph taken during the premiere of Bombay Talkies’ debut Hindi feature film *Jawani ki Hawa* (1935). 35 mm Negative Image courtesy: Josef Wirsching Archive/ The Alkazi Collection of Photography (2019.01.0049)

Fig. 3.6b
Crowds outside the Imperial Cinema in Bombay being surveilled by a police *bundobast* (deployment). Photograph taken during the premiere of Bombay Talkies’ debut feature film *Jawani ki Hawa* (1935). 35 mm Negative Image courtesy: Josef Wirsching Archive/ The Alkazi Collection of Photography (2019.01.0050)

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dramatic vigour [*The Mill*] has is in the strike scenes … A shot in which a worker is shown clenching his fist in indignation, by itself, has intense drama in it."[19] For the censor board, the dramatic intensity of a filmic fist clenched in anger threatened to translate into a thousand fists raised against the city's capitalist infrastructure. At the core of the censor's anxiety was trepidation about the mimetic power of cinema to induce action, to successfully instigate a collective uprising by an anonymous urban crowd that has turned political.

Lotte Hoek has written powerfully about the actual use of film projection screens in political processions in present-day Bangladesh. For her, the "screen in the crowd" is a "modular political form in the digitally enabled crowd of the 21st century," and is effective because it taps into the political potentials of a crowd that is immersed in the visual proliferations of a heavily mediatized contemporary world.[20] In this brief essay I have tried to shed light on the spatial and sensorial continuities between cinema-in-the-hall in 1930s Bombay and politics-in-the-streets. Here, the very specific crowds of Bombay city are attuned to an emerging visual imagination via the movies and are being trained in new techniques of seeing. The continuities between cinema hall and city street pulse along the axes of spectacle and address, the training of the gaze and the material interpellation of a collective. The Nursey album images, with their immediate appeal to the visual and the spatial, urge us to move beyond the content of speeches (which we cannot hear), to the material practices of civil disobedience, the physical choreography of collective resistance and the physical reconfiguration of city spaces into political theatre. The album offers an intermedial story that moves between architecture, photography, newspapers, urban design, public processions and policing. My goal has been to introduce the urban fact of cinema into the story as a mass perceptual machinery that attunes the individual to a collective gaze and extends into the street as political spectatorship.

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Notes

Parts of this text draw on ideas first developed in the author's essay, "A Specter Haunts Bombay: Censored Itineraries of a Lost Communistic Film", *Film History*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2019), pp. 29–59.

1. Stefan Jonsson, *Crowds and Democracy: The Idea and Image of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 10. For more on crowds, see Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart, 12th ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980); and Christian Borch, *The Politics of Crowds: An Alternative History of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
2. Jonsson, *Crowds and Democracy*, p. 217.
3. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1994), pp. 252–54.
4. See Avrati Bhatnagar and Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Light Writing on the Lathi Raj: Bombay, 1930–31", *History of Photography*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2021), pp. 304–19.
5. Photographers credited in *The Bombay Chronicle* in 1930 include P.K. Chowdhary, D. Misra and Khanchand.
6. Bhatnagar and Ramaswamy, "Light Writing", pp. 5–6.
7. Jim Masselos, "Audiences, Actors and Congress Dramas: Crowd Events in Bombay City in 1930", *South Asia*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1985), pp. 71–86. *Prabhat pheris* or morning processions were a popular political technique used by the Congress wherein small groups of (mostly) women cadres walked through residential neighbourhoods in the early hours of the morning, singing a mix of religious and patriotic songs.
8. ibid., p. 72.
9. Nusrat S. Chowdhury, *Paradoxes of the Popular: Crowd Politics in Bangladesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 10.
10. For more on "cine-ecology," a spatial concept that brings together arenas of film exhibition, production and consumption with practices of urban work, leisure and politics, see Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
11. For detailed discussions on Indian reactions to colonialist and racist films, see Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Babli Sinha, *Cinema, Transnationalism, and Colonial India: Entertaining the Raj* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Poonam Arora, "'Imperilling the Prestige of the White Woman': Colonial Anxiety and Film Censorship in British India", *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1995), pp. 36–50.
12. For a detailed study, see Mukherjee, "A Specter Haunts Bombay".
13. This large audience share was mainly due to the state of distribution and exhibition infrastructures in the 1930s, with film theatres concentrated in a few urban centres and a distribution network focused on building up a few "territories" and unable to expand much further due to a lack of reliable capital. See Valentina Vitali, *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 75, 96.
14. Jonsson, *Crowds and Democracy*, p. 216.
15. Foundational theories of the relation between cinema and urban modernity build on this idea of "distracted" vision in an urban landscape of electric signs, shop windows and frenetic traffic. See, for example, Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1993).
16. Rosalind C. Morris, "Theses on the New *Öffentlichkeit*", *Grey Room*, vol. 51 (2013), pp. 94–111, at p. 103.
17. Francis Cody, *The News Event: Popular Sovereignty in the Age of Deep Mediatization* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2023), p. 3.
18. Prem Chowdhry, "Propaganda and Protest: The Myth of the Muslim Menace in an Empire Film (The Drum, 1938)", *Studies in History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2000), pp. 109–30, at p. 109.
19. Khwaja A. Abbas, "'The Mill'—But What About 'Mazdoor'?", *The Bombay Chronicle*, 14 June 1939, p. 10.
20. Lotte Hoek, "A Screen in the Crowd: Film Societies and Political Protest in Bangladesh", in Zhen Zhang, Sangjoon Lee, Debashree Mukherjee and Intan Paramditha (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Asian Cinemas* (New York: Routledge, 2024).