Of Love, Death and All things in-between
A Review of *Ludo* (2020, Hindi, Dir. Anurag Basu)

Cinema, in its essence, aims to reflect core values and morals associated with the social structure that we live in. Regardless the truth and relevance of such a statement, in a democratic setup as India, this is adopted as the guiding norm towards the response to films which doesn't necessarily align themselves to such worldview by the Indian film certification board and the 'saviors 'of Indian culture (who often masquerade as trolls and rightwing sympathizers). Whether such actions are necessary is far beyond the scope of this article but what these actions aim to foreground is a certain meaning in seemingly insignificant acts of outrage: a meaning to affirm one's identity, morality, political ideology or citizenship. In a way, this act of 'outrage for a cause' also sets to point out, without pondering onto the depths of existential nihilism, that our lives are mostly governed by a set of random meaningless actions which falls short of constituting a concrete whole and the struggle to affirm meaning and logic is

our way of denying the arbitrariness of the world, especially in middle of a global pandemic. But what if a piece of work embraces this absurdity and runs with it? What will that look like? The result can be something like Anurag Basu's painstakingly crafted hyperlink film *Ludo* (2020), which is definitely not unique in its representation of randomness, even if we just consider Indian films (viz. films like *Super Deluxe* (2019) , *Kaminey* (2008) *Yun Hota toh Kya Hota* (2006) *, City of God* (2011) etc. comes to mind), but it becomes interesting through its entanglement of the characters and the narrative through the creation of a space that is unique in its aesthetic choices, representation and logic. In the discussion to follow, I will attempt to look at the film through Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque space and how this space becomes the vessel to talk about the film's philosophical attitude towards morality and randomness that the narrative wears up its sleeve.

The film begins with a scene referencing Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) where two people are engaged in a board game, one of them being the initiator of death and debating about the seemingly moral/absurd nature of life and death. With the metaphor of Ludo in place, the film then focuses on the connecting thread and representative centre of the 4 stories, the character of the vicious local gangster Sattu Bhaiya, who brings forth the unrequited desires of the characters in foreground, some intentional and some unintentional and puts into the motion the circular and entangling nature of time that the characters inhabit. In the beginning, the film follows the familiar Hindi film affliction towards fate (the proverbial *kismet*) and its intricacies through the song *O Beta Ji* and a voiceover introducing the four stories. As is the staple with hyperlink films, as noted by Alissa Quart in a 2005 Film Comment article, the action in the narrative as it progresses multiplies in a rapid manner resembling that of the phenomenon of 'virality' with respect to internet. The film is also replete with usage of split screen and footnotes, further signifying the correlation of Hyperlink narrative and the current digital media culture of proliferation, multiplication and multitasking that we inhabit. Further, the use of non-linear narrative, signifying the increased connectivity in a shared spatio-temporal plane, connected through digital objects is also seen in abundance through the narrative. However, in *Ludo,* this connected nature is almost always contradicted by central characters who are in some way lonely- the reformed convict, the migrant worker, the old school middle class good guy and the illogical lover boy and in search for the lost object of desire- of love, of fatherhood, of material plenitude, of companionship, of passion among others. The loneliness is particularly replete with sequences in private spaces with the central characters framed alongside aching emptiness and spaces of intimacy viz. trains, cafes, shopping malls, restaurants among others. as seen most memorably in the split-screen sequence connecting the four characters- all of them lonely yet filled with desire for something or the other, reminding one of the disparate and lonely characters in Wong Kar Wai's masterful *Chungking Express* (1997). Like parts of that film, in *Ludo* too, the characters are connected to each other more so through their shared experiences of loneliness and desire amidst the increasingly

networked world that they inhabit more so than the literal connections that the narrative throws in somewhat randomly and sometimes forcibly. This connection is further valorized through Basu's use of color in the film where a particular color is although attributed to each central character's moral positioning and their respective world, the colors happen to flow seamlessly from one character to another throughout the film further signifying the chiaroscuro world they inhabit. For example, in the post-credit sequence of the film, where the characters seemed to have reached their individual conclusions, the blue side of the board, signified by Rahul and Sheeja, are shown to wear clothes and drive a red car, bought from the stolen money which was the colour of the now deceased Bittu, signifying rage and love signifying the present governing element of their characters.

Further, the object of desire- that which can never be attained in a networked world, becomes increasingly attainable as the narrative progresses and the characters start getting thrown into each other's narrative. This stance is further achieved through the usage of space by Anurag Basu, who in his previous two outings, *Barfi* (2012) and *Jagga Jasoos* (2017) used real life markers of spaces (Darjeeling, Kolkata, Purulia, Manipur and Africa respectively) which became increasingly utopic and fantastical as the narrative progresses. In *Ludo*, there is a certain intermingling of disparate elements in the filmic space where it becomes hard to distinguish whether the space is urban, rural or semi- urban. In the beginning of the film, there are shots which focus on nautanki, paralleled with shots of industrial machineries, Sattu Bhaiya's den, which exists in the periphery, Bittu's house siding the railway tracks along with shots of posh restaurants and malls which further distance the film from any real world setting, rather positing an abstract 'North Indian City' marker. Further, the number plates used on the vehicles are also shunned of any real signifier and makes the space more contradictory- generic yet ripe with plenitude. Although Ranchi or Bhilai is mentioned in the film, it is more concerned with presentation or mapping of spaces rather than representation as reality is incomprehensible and can only be made sense in terms of events after events, further accentuating the conflict. This mapping of events and a certain sense of anti- realism becomes

much more crucial in the second half of the film, as the misplaced desires of the characters punctuate the actions. As the film progresses, Basu deliberately does away with any spatial signifier and creates a space where the characters and their desires shape the space as the narrative progresses. in the second half of the film, Basu brings in images of the ferries wheel in a local fair, Bahurupiyas dressed as Hindu gods in lush green fields and other such disparities which exists side by side, bound by machinations of surveillance, legality and violence.

In a way then, the cinematic space in *Ludo* can be read as an extension of Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque. As formulated in his seminal work *Rabelais and His World*, the space of the medieval/ renaissance carnival was associated with spectacles as feasts, festivals and other manifestations of folk/popular culture aimed to provide a temporary respite from the societal transgressions and pressures. This respite was primarily achieved by the implementation of mockery, inversion and travesty to shatter taboos and were regarded as liberation from the established order through a suspension of any hierarchical privileges, norms and prohibitions, aimed at a temporary disruption of authority through debasement and levelling. Similarly, in *Ludo*, there are evocations of early forms of storytelling like the implementation of *sutradhar* with the two narrators, similar to a more conventional drama or *jatra*, usage of frequent flashbacks which was prevalent in earlier mainstream films. Further, one of the subplots in *Ludo* involves the discovery of a sex tape and this immediately brings into mind the numerous scandalous connotations associated with the object along with shaming of the involved individuals that were prevalent in media coverage of last decade. However, the film deals with it in a 'matter-of- fact' way, mocking it and further normalizes it with the final reaction of the groom who reacts in an understated manner, focusing more on the woman's plight rather than society's expectations and pressures.

To bring back Bakhtin again, much of the subversive potential of the carnivalesque derives from the incorporation and inversion of 'high' culture (in terms of cinema, realistic, aesthetically shot and visualized auteur films) into 'low' forms (melodrama, slapstick, expository narration associated with early performance arts and more popular cinema) where it is recycled, debased, and ridiculed. In carnival, the artificial boundary between high and low culture is a favourite target of parodic force. Although, the film in question is not parody per se, a subtle undercurrent of dark comedy and a reversal of popular generic tropes of cinema as well as general conceptions of gender also comes into foreground in *Ludo*, which is further accentuated through mixing of disparate genres like romantic comedy, crime drama, slapstick into a convoluted whole. One can argue that, the disparate genres are also used by Basu as connecting thread through which the characters get connected- sometimes through events, but mostly through actions. This is shown in the skillfully edited sequence where two chase sequences (Bittu/Mini and Rahul/Sheeja) are connected by a dancing Mithun impersonator (Alok).

In this regard, the usage of the crime genre becomes particularly important as Basu deliberately puts Sattu Bhaiya, a ruthless gangster figure who is seemingly immortal, in the centre of all actions and makes him gradually more sympathetic and amoral as the film unfolds. In *Ludo*, Sattu Bhaiya who murders people without any clear motive, is gleefully proud of his amoral afflictions, just like any other cinematic gangster figure. As seen in seminal Hindi Gangster films like *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012), *Satya* (1998), *Company* (2002) among others, the gangster figure always has to die in hand of the policeman or rival gang members to restore the moral value of the universe he inhabits and to evoke a sense of pity and fear among the spectators. The gangster figure serves as a warning sign for the audience for aiming too high and is portrayed as a tragic Icarus like figure. However, Basu subverts the 'crime never pays' trope of gangster films by making him survive in spite of all odds and relegating the police in the background, as mere accessories, further signifying the transgression and liberation that the carnivalesque space offers. In fact, every crime committed by other central characters like murder, loot and even jail break remains unpunished in the narrative. Ironically, the only central character that dies in the film, Bittu is the one who realizes his faults and attempts to walk down a path of redemption, further signifying the suspension of so-called norms and rules and championing of sacrilegious acts that is only possible in the confines of the carnivalesque.

Further, by focusing on the micro-narratives of personal desires, deceits and dreams instead of an overarching hegemonic grand narrative of aspirational attributes, morality tales and nation-building, Basu foregrounds the inherent meaninglessness of the world we inhabit. This is further done through a destabilization of prevalent patriarchal orders of society by bringing out an antithetical attribute in the micro-narratives of the film. For example, the aspirational narrative of Shruti, who equated money with happiness because of her upbringing, brings into foreground the societal expectations of the middle class towards monetary affluence, but her rejection of it towards the end instead helps in the formulation of her individuality. However, with the characters of Rahul and Sheeja, both of whom had the same monetary aspiration which brought them into the city in the first place are shown to be living their dream life with stolen money, further instilling the absurd meaninglessness of the world, notably absent in other Hindi films of the heist genre, like *Badmaash Company* (2010), *Johnny Gaddar* (2007) among others . Although both the narratives can be argued to have a contradictory solution, Basu hinges on the importance of perspective which provides different solutions for different objects of desire.

Interestingly, this idea of different perspectives was also crucial for Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque space as a space of resistance where different and alternative voices, not succumbing to the traditional authoritative symbolic order, are allowed to thrive and inhabit. This notion of the carnivalesque space in Basu's film where the traditional attributes towards truth, morality and ideas are always put into conflict then becomes crucial to foreground a certain political as well as cultural change in a world where death is as meaningless as life itself, especially amidst an ongoing global pandemic. All the central characters in his film find their desired happiness by focusing on their individual desires and aspirations and not succumbing to the whims of the symbolic order. In a way then, echoing Romanian philosopher E.M. Cioran's words, Basu seems to suggest through his celebration of absurdity and foregrounding of the grotesque and subsequent processes of becoming (viz. intercourse, death and giving birth), that life only provides you freedom when there is nothing left to lose and the desire to live and love are the only things to look forward to in an increasingly meaningless world, which is embroiled also in his film form.

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