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## SPECTRAL PIXELS: DIGITAL GHOSTS IN CONTEMPORARY HINDI HORROR CINEMA

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**Abstract:** The contemporary moment has seen growing aggregates of urban populations accommodate and get entwined increasingly into ‘technologized’ models of experience. The ‘technological’ is now seamlessly ensconced into the basic material flesh of the city’s quotidian everyday life (Sundaram 2010). As the ‘ordinary’ today is peppered and constituted by humdrum technological objects, a foundational transformation in our sensorium is precipitated – newer regimes of materiality are inaugurated as our bodies are perpetually girdled by a new object-world. In this new changing experience of the material everyday, the technological also becomes a primary precinct in which negotiations with the supernatural (and the uncanny) get staged. The technological increasingly serves, in different ways, as the evidentiary archive for the supernatural, its site of production, and the premiere mise en scene of its performance within Hindi cinema.

This paper closely chases the transformations in the contemporary horror film, focusing especially on *Ragini MMS* (Kriplani 2011) and *13B* (Kumar 2009) to understand how the spectral today gets densely intermeshed with the digital. Clearly distinct from the earlier Ramsay brothers’ productions, as well as the later moment that Sangita Gopal has bracketed as ‘New Horror’ (2012), these films locate the site of horror entirely within the technological. This paper argues that the technological is not merely the site through which the spectral articulates itself, but also its thematic raison’d etre in a rapidly changing contemporary digital moment. While *Ragini MMS* explores the idea of the spectral ‘poor image’ – a ghostly MMS that haunts its own makers; *13B* presents a television set that gets inhabited by mortified bodies of an earlier time who play out a daily soap that echoes and predicts the future of the family watching it.

### **Low-Res Horrors: Grainy Images and the Technological Uncanny**

Ghosts, it would appear, cannot ever be High-Definition. They can be low resolution, (in fact they seem to work superbly with 240p) but high-resolution images just seem incapable of capturing them. A simple generic YouTube search for ‘*real ghost seen on camera/ true video of actual ghost/ paranormal activity captured on camera*’ or variations of such, throws up long lists of pixilated low resolution videos – all of them nearly uniform in their granular low quality texture. The lower the resolution and the hazier the footage, the scarier (and ‘truer’) the video feels. HD videos in comparison seem far less potent in capturing ghosts: it is as if 1080p erases ghosts. As if the ‘poor image’ (Steyerl 2010) is always a sounder covenant of authenticity, even in the context of the supernatural. Unlike the carefully ‘constructed’ aesthetic of conventional cinema, it appears unpremeditated and uncontrived. Its vocabulary is that of the *grab-footage*, an image recorded purely for *functional* use that accidentally (and thereby, objectively) unveils specks of phenomenon activity from our everyday that we seem to have passed unnoticed. There is also the resiliently enduring legacy of the documentary – these jerky, handheld, grainy videos get easily situated in the long standing heritage of the documentary image that was traditionally conceived as somehow ‘truer’ and more ‘real’ than the clearly fictitious cinematic image. While scores of voices have long pointed to the fictive and constructed nature of the documentary (and the ‘home-video’), its putative authenticity has consistently been processed by horror film machineries across the world. Films like *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick 1999), *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski 2002), *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves 2008) and the whole *Paranormal Activity* franchise (Oren Peli 2007, 2010, 2011) have regularly worked with variations of the found footage/grab footage formats to evoke horror. The cult of the low-resolution video is increasingly one of the most densely populated sites of horror today.

A large part of the panoply of contemporary horror films (across various film cultures) have at their heart a primordial fear – the prospect of endless replication the digital seems to offer. The ‘no generation loss’ promise that digital technology made led to the creation of a widely discernable fear of a perpetually multiplying ‘digital’ mechanism, that threatens to besiege our ‘analog’ existence (Rodowick 2007). Behind so

many of our modern urban nightmares therefore, is perhaps the tension of a format war (ibid). In a slightly different context, after a spate of similar films released between the summers of 1999 to 2001, David Rodowick fascinatingly observed that:

“This was the summer of digital paranoia. In a trend that began with *Dark City* the year before, films like *The Matrix*, *Thirteenth Floor*, and *eXistenZ* each played with the idea that a digitally created simulation could invisibly and seamlessly replace the solid, messy, analog world of our everyday life. Technology had effectively become nature, wholly replacing our complex and chaotic world—too “smelly” according to the lead Agent in *The Matrix*—with an imaginary simulation in which social control was nearly complete....The digital versus the analog was the heart of narrative conflict in these films, as if cinema were fighting for its very aesthetic existence. The replacement of the analog world by a digital simulation functions here as an allegorical conflict wherein cinema struggles to reassert or redefine its identity in the face of a new representational technology that threatens to overwhelm it” (Rodowick 2007: 4)

This terrifying regime of the digital demands endless replication, the poor image *must* be copied and passed on. Tamara’s image in *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski 2002) *must* be transferred to another, the ring *must* be completed (the protagonist of the film in the end, is able to survive only because she passes the image and the chain goes on). Singularity leads to death, spectral copies *must* to be passed on - the unimpeachable ritual of the *poor image* is endless unfettered transference and multiplication.

### **The Digital Uncanny**

The contemporary digital moment has produced a new order of the uncanny. Right from its most traditional conception, the uncanny has been understood as a fundamental experience of a kind of disorientation - where the world we inhabit everyday suddenly appears strange, alienating or threatening (Collins and Jervis 2008). It is the inexplicable insertion of the unsettling within the humdrum; a foundational indecision “or uncertainty, at the heart of our ontology, our sense of time, place, and history, both personal and cultural” (ibid: 2). As reasoned thought and ‘rationality’ become core cultural values of the contemporary moment, so “the threats posed to them by these recalcitrant experiences, seemingly emanating from ‘inside’ (the ‘unconscious’)... become all the more troubling” (ibid). The traditional ‘outside’ however ie the inanimate object world around us, has undergone foundational changes in recent years.

Formerly solid, inert surfaces now have different kinds of disembodied projected images played out on them. In his work on spectrality in the media Jeffery Sconce suggests that:

‘Sound and image without material substance, the electronically mediated worlds of telecommunications often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form’, and by bringing this ‘spectral world’ into the home, the equipment takes on the appearance of a ‘haunted apparatus’ [Sconce quoted in *Uncanny Modernity* (2008): 5]

The onslaught of the digital in the last few years has triggered a significant shift in the physical relationship between the viewer’s body, and the myriad screens surrounding us. A large compendium of our banal daily activities now gets carried out on the various digital interfaces that pepper our everyday lives. The interaction with these screens often happens in diverse ways and via different senses. As touchscreen technology becomes pervasive, the very idea of the electronic screen transforms as the body becomes foundationally involved in the visual itself – unsurprisingly, terms like ‘haptic technology’ or ‘corporeal vision’ have become part of the regular vocabulary around cellular phone technologies today. On the streets, unending audio-visual material displayed on billboards constantly surrounds us, structuring our daily geographies and movement - screens increasingly become a part of the basic architectonics that situate us physically. Similarly, various haptic devices now come fitted with retina-identification/fingerprint match services that create singular screens that can only be activated by individual viewer bodies. As a number of contemporary theorists working on the digital suggest, the body itself becomes a sort of medium in which images get created and played out in this hyper-screened world (Wegenstein 2006, Hansen 2006, Belting 2004)

In this permeable space where the medium becomes corporealized and the body more medial, newer contours of what constitutes horror and fear get drawn (Wegenstein 2006). Technology has been a site/sight of abomination in the last few years, as our bodies, inseparable from their newfound technological extensions, take on unfamiliar and potentially grotesque forms. ‘Body-horror’ a sub-genre of horror fiction in which

the horror is principally elicited via the graphic degeneration of the body (through disease, mutilation etc) and now sources the feelings of repulsion and abhorrence from this new body-technology complex. (Mcroy 2005). In the new matrix of body-screen relationships, horror gets created as the *viewer's body* often gets disfigured and mutilated into newer potentially eerie shapes. Screens take on overtly 'bodily' personas (used in films like David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) or via the perverse distortion of the viewer-medium relationship like in *Requiem For A Dream* (Darren Aronofsky 2000) or *Cable Guy* (Ben Stiller 1996) or stories of individual screens infiltrated by supernatural phenomenon (like in Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982) or Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* (2005) Both *13B and Ragini MMS* provide interesting situations of horror in the context of changing relation of the body-screen and the digital image in question here.

### **MMS Hauntings – Bluetooth Ghosts From Tomorrow?**

As the primary manufacturer of low-resolution videos, cellphones seem to present the next level of technological medium to get besieged by ghostly presences. In the book *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (2000), Jeffrey Sconce traces the long-standing association of new electronic media – right from the emergence of the telegraph to the invention of television and computer technologies - with paranormal spiritual phenomena. By laying out a detailed historical analysis of the relations between communication technologies and metaphysical preoccupations, Sconce delineates how accounts of '*electronic presence*' have gradually changed over the decades “from a fascination with the boundaries of space and time to a more generalized anxiety over the seeming sovereignty of technology” (Sconce 2000: 264).

What has taken on a significant spectral quality within cellular technology is the content that cellphones are known to circulate (instead of specific instances of haunted cellphone sets). The MMS in particular, has taken on a distinct cultural identity within Indian urban spaces in recent years. The first 'MMS scandal' (now almost a codified generic description for pornographic videos involving heterosexual couples in sexual

positions shot on cellphones) to get widely discussed in popular media was the infamous ‘DPS MMS scandal’ in 2004. The video involving two 17-year-old students from the posh Delhi Public School R.K Puram became something of a media sensation, when someone uploaded it for public auction on the online auction/shopping site Baze.com<sup>i</sup>. This spiraled into a full blown media event as the then CEO of the online auction company was booked under the obscenities section of the IT Act (2000), and the Delhi court stipulated that anyone found possessing the clip could be imprisoned for six months and/ charged a fine up to 10,000 rupees.<sup>ii</sup> The clip spread like a contagion across cities, spawning a number of similar MMS related ‘scandals’ soon after. Following these were other prominent ‘cases’ that caught the media eye, like the Mona Chopra MMS in 2006, the ‘Sahranpur MMS’ in 2009, the JNU ‘sex scandal’ in 2011 and a string of celebrity MMS’s – the Shahid Kapoor-Kareena Kapoor ‘kiss’ clip in 2004, the Riya Sen-Ashmit Patel sex video in 2005, the Soha Ali Khan ‘beauty saloon’ clip, the ‘*baba-MMS*’ involving Godman Nithyananda with Tamil actresses Ranjitha and Yuvarani, the Sania Mirza ‘shower footage’ MMS and so on.<sup>iii</sup> These MMS clips create their own circulation economies, proliferating across cellphones via Bluetooth in school canteens, tuition centers, playgrounds, and boy’s hostels; or a plurality of video portals, social media pages, porn websites, dedicated chat rooms and forums (to the point that most Indian porn sites now have a separate page banner heading called ‘MMS’). Within a few years Hindi films also began drawing on what was rapidly becoming an identifiable story around cellular technology. Anurag Kashyap’s *Dev D* (2008) and Dibakar Banerjee’s *Love Sex aur Dhokha* (2010) based parts of the narrative on MMS scandals, exploring the possible lives of people involved before and after the outbreak of the scandal. Both films (especially *Love Sex Aur Dhokha*) work on unraveling a dystopic moral counter-side to the general celebratory euphoria around globalization and the digital explosion. While Kashyap’s film used the MMS scandal and the moral jamboree around it as a back-story to peg the character Leni’s entry into sex work, Banerjee’s film fictionalizes a typical incident where a boy decides to surreptitiously record his sexual enterprise with an unsuspecting girl.

Buoyed by the unexpected success of her first ‘found-footage’ film, *Love Sex Aur Dhokha*, producer Ekta Kapoor’s Balaji Motion Pictures moved towards producing more

“low budget, high concept films like *Ragini MMS*, that was sure to recover money from its select audience.”<sup>iv</sup> The genesis of the idea of *Ragini MMS* was predicated on the concept of the MMS cult. In an incredibly insightful explanation the film’s writer Mayank Tiwari quips:

“In some ways you can think of *Ragini MMS* in close relation with the 2nd story (the ‘Sex’ part) of *LSD*. What if a similar character tried something similar in a place that was haunted? MMS works through cults. All of us know that MMS’ usually spread through small private groups where boys hang out (“tune ye waali dekhi, ye waali hai tere paas? etc)... No one really knows who the actual girl is, her life and the details of the relationship with the man etc. In some ways a woman who was killed many years ago because of being termed a witch is also a victim of a senseless tag about that spreads through people, causing great damage to her. In the end the ghost can kill everyone else but not Ragini despite torturing her, because she is innocent, unlike Uday and can rightfully say “I have not done anything”. The film is a combination of voyeurism in sex and in the supernatural. In a way you can say the film itself is a MMS, it’s a MMS that tries to make the making of a MMS scary.”<sup>v</sup>

The connection between the prosecution of supposed witches and “hounding” the girl’s faces post the MMS spread seems heavy-handed, and the assumption of the woman’s necessarily miserable state seems to leave no space to imagine a woman who might choose to remain unconcerned about the dissemination of the image of her body. What Tiwari’s intervention does however provide is an alternate reading of *Ragini MMS* in relation to what the film’s promotion and the film itself would suggest.

*Ragini MMS* revolves around a young couple Ragini (Kainaz Motivala) and Uday (Raj Kumar Yadav) who drive to a secluded house deep in a forest for the weekend, primarily to have sex “*without getting interrupted*”. Unknown to Ragini the whole house is rigged with hidden cameras by Uday who intends to make a pornographic MMS of their encounters at the behest of his boss Panditji. It is these cameras that provide the only optics in this found-footage film. The house however is haunted by the ghost of a Marathi woman who had been killed under the allegation of being a witch years ago. The ghost kills Uday, and (as is discovered later in the film) everyone who’s come to the house before this; and tortures Ragini for days before Ragini’s body is found unconscious nearby, alive but in considerable trauma. A final title card suggests that an MMS of Ragini begins circulating soon after.

Both the film's innovative marketing before its release and the review-responses to it after, seemed to consistently refer to the inherent MMS-like character of the film. In what was an extremely unconventional strategy, Ekta Kapoor designated hoards of auto-rickshaws across Bombay and Delhi that carried comments about the film. Several autos carried the message – “*Ragini ka MMS dekha kya*” (did you see Ragini's MMS); while others boldly declared – “*Ragini yahaan baithi thi*” (Ragini sat here once). In a similar vein, while film critic Pankaj Sabnani from Glamsham.com commented “Ragini MMS isn't worth '*circulating*', if you have a large appetite for horror”, Mayank Shekhar wrote in the *Hindustan Times* about the “basic instinct of voyeurism” while watching a film that resembles an MMS. Nearly all other reviews commented on the mix of sex and horror in the film – while the *Times Of India* film critic Nikhat Kazmi called it “a MMS that makes a heady cocktail of sex and horror”, Priyanka Bhardwaj observed that “the mix of titillation and horror form a lethal combination”<sup>vi</sup>.

Ekta Kapoor's promotion strategy was to mobilize a sort of intrigued prattle around the illicit image that would connect to the navigation circuits Mayank Tiwari describes of the MMS clip. While “*Dekha Kya*” (*Did you see it?*) quotes the sense of entitlement the watching of the clip allows (where having seen the film becomes a sort of cultural password); “*Ragini yahaan Baithi Thi*” (*Ragini sat here*) nods at the sort of aura the ‘body’ of the girl in the MMS usually attains after becoming ‘viral’. It hints at a culture where individuals immediately begin staking historical claim at the woman's body once the video's out. “She sat here” is the forging of a historical instance of interaction with the real body behind the fuzzy figure in the pixilated image traveling through thousands of cellphones.

At the face of it, *Ragini MMS* does not involve cellphones at all; in fact the technology barely even appears in the film. Yet in the attitude towards it, in its reception, its marketing strategies, and its visual aesthetic (and in the motivations of the supernatural force haunting its characters), the MMS as a kind of traveling contraband sexual image predominates and endures throughout. What if, the film seems to be asking, the woman in the endlessly circulated image decided to punish those who make the videos? What if the image itself decides to haunt and punish its producer-distributor?

Unlike films like *13B* the anxiety in Ekta Kapoor's movie doesn't stem from a new digital that threatens to overwhelm and subjugate the real world, but from its perverse opposite. It is the analog, the real body in the image that decides to wreak revenge against the image maker(s); it is a violent impulse against a rapacious misogynistic image production and distribution set-up itself. From the very beginning of the film, the producer of the image and the voice heard from behind the camera, Uday is set up as a violently misogynistic and penetrative figure who barges into women's rooms to shoot them, manhandles women around him and constantly manipulates the camera to capture intimate moments with Ragini while she is unaware.<sup>vii</sup>

The image that Uday intends to supply of Ragini, and the larger image-politics *Ragini MMS* partakes of is the product of a specific and recent historical-technological development. By 2003, Nokia had launched its first cellphone with video recording facility in India, and within three years YouTube.com had made a prominent entry into India. What these formations bred was a robust culture of shooting videos/pictures, transferring them through Bluetooth, or uploading them on video sharing platforms, downloading, re-editing, and re-distributing as intricate networks of dissemination came to be established. These new images were lighter, more malleable, and generally moved about with a velocity hitherto unthinkable with the traditional cinema image. Hito Steyerl provides a nuanced conceptual description of this new economy of circulation. For Steyerl this 'poor image' is a

“...a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction... (I)t is a visual idea in its very becoming...Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. ... is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all (Steyerl 2011: 1).

Whether the girl's body in the MMS is visible or just an indistinguishable haze of blurry pixels is irrelevant, what matters is the act of transference and the shared viewership. The

MMS is an integral part of a digital culture, where the ‘clip’ does not really have viewers; it has a widely dispersed community of users - “the editors, critics, translators, and co-authors of poor images” (ibid). These poor images inhabit a steadily dematerialized form as “they steadily lose matter and gain speed” (ibid) - the real bodies in the video thus move towards an inevitable death by fuzziness each time a newer FLV video file is uploaded on any file-hosting platform.

In *Ragini MMS*, the production of this ‘poor image’ (the plot’s governing logic, and its optical logic) gets violently disrupted and ravaged. Various instances of attempted sexual consummation get forcibly interrupted and aborted because of mysterious external reasons. The food gets worm-ridden, the electricity goes, Uday’s hair gets pulled – each occasion disrupting his attempts to commence the sex video he hopes to make<sup>viii</sup>.

Given that Balaji Motion Pictures also pitched this as the first Indian ‘date horror’ movie, *Ragini MMS* locates itself in a long litany of cautionary fables<sup>ix</sup> like moral narratives where monstrous entities threaten teenage/young couple that venture off into the woods/deserted house for physical intimacy (the whole *Friday The 13th* series, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, 2002) etc deal with women protagonists being unceasingly chased by threatening presences).<sup>x</sup> The violent didactic impulse gets deflected on to an altogether different site in the contemporary digital moment. The source of anxiety is not so much the sexual prurience of the young couple but the sheer possibility of being captured as the digital image. The primordial moral fear now is of the body getting dematerialized and dispersed into a plurality of multiple low-quality images that can travel uncontrollably through the endless annals of the digital world.<sup>xi</sup> The film ends on an eerily ambiguous note – the final slide says Ragini’s MMS goes viral on the internet within ten months of the incident. This seems a deliberate obfuscation, given that the couple doesn’t actually have sex (or get into physical intimate positions) throughout, and mainly because the whole film itself is pitched as a ‘found-footage’ film. The only MMS that can be made of Ragini then cannot possibly include the usual clips of copulation or fellatio, it can at best be a cautionary clip indexing the presence of the spectral. ‘Ragini-MMS’ then (the speculated MMS that goes viral in the end and the film as a whole) is an MMS in absentia, a meta-MMS that mobilizes its own form to exhort against the

production of MMS' in general. With reports of the sequel *Ragini MMS 2* nearing completion being rife, it appears that the uncanny's inauguration of the cellphone is occurring primarily in the form of the rapidly traveling MMS image.

### ***13B: Terror Has a New Address – Televising Specters (“TV mein kuch hai”)***

In the book *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema* (2012) Sangita Gopal provides a detailed historical lineage of the Hindi horror film of the last few decades. She distinguishes between two particular key moments in the tradition: an earlier moment beginning in the 1970s with a spate of low budget B-circuit productions made by the prolific Ramsay brothers that were released right up until 1990, and a newer coterie of post-liberalization films starting with *Raat* (1992), followed by *Raaz* (2002) *Bhoot* (2003), *Phoonk* (2008), *1920* (2011), and *13B* (2011) which she categorizes as 'New Horror' (Gopal 2012).

Hindi horror films arrived popularly as a genre only as late as the early 1970s when a number of campy, low budget, B-circuit horror films made by the Ramsay “cottage industry” began circuiting theatres at the smaller centers<sup>xiii</sup>. As Gopal contends, despite the prominent ‘monster’ track, many of these movies were unseamly mishmashes of tropes extracted from the most accepted generic forms of the day – they often included long song and dance routines, stock action sequences, comedy, romance, and family melodrama (all peppered alongside stock situations involving ancient curses, gory murders, and intra-family monsters) (Gopal 2012). Gopal notes that the horror in these films would largely “function exclusively on the field of the social” – the monster (usually the product of curses cast hundreds of years ago) would unleash itself on a larger social collective (usually a group of friends as well as a whole neighboring village), and the collective would eventually work together towards carrying out the exorcism (Gopal 2012: 99). The realm of the monster in many of these films was a defined geographical space (like a basement) that characters could physically travel to (Gopal 2012).

What Gopal terms ‘New Horror’ on the other hand, starts with the release of Ram Gopal Verma’s *Raat* (1992), a film that expressly broke out of the unrealistic

format that the Ramsay horror films had since cemented (ibid). The primary drive in *Raat*, and many horror films that followed immediately after as Gopal observes, was to announce a radical departure from the earlier moment by being firstly, ‘naturalistic’, and deflecting the horror on to a much more interiorized psychological arena (ibid). The source of horror is not seen anymore, its presence is merely indicated either by placing the camera as a point of view of the spirit (usually as it creeps in on or surreptitiously watches the protagonist) or just by showing the sheer horror in the face of characters that see ‘something’. Gopal notes that New horror is based on individual psychology rather than community legends, cults and folklores, and focuses on upwardly mobile, urban couples that speak in the language of science, progress and development (ibid). Instead of cobwebbed, sinister looking interiors with dark hidden labyrinthine passages these films have clean, ordered, almost antiseptic looking interiors of high-rise flats where horror is evoked through everyday material objects like fridges, televisions, cellphones, lights etc (ibid). Replete with a number of these new characteristics, *13B* also significantly layers and enriches the possibilities of this new sub genre even further

After winning the national award for his film *Silent Scream* in 1999, Vikram Kumar wanted to work on the burgeoning obsession for television soaps that was raging across most parts of India at the time. By 2008, Kumar had written a short treatment for a film that he had tentatively titled ‘Channel’, about a ghost-ridden television set that played a daily soap that predicted the lives of the family watching it. While the Tamil version of the film went on to become a resounding commercial success, the Hindi version released as *13B: Fear Has a New Address* (2011), allegedly managed moderately good returns as well. The film also garnered relatively favorable reviews, with almost every response flagging the new distinct form of the supernatural presented in the film. Nikhat Kazmi of the *Times of India* noted that it was

a topical dig on the 21st century global obsession: the all-pervasive and prying influence of television which seems to have completely taken over our lives. And if that's not a strong-enough statutory warning, the innocuous idiot box may soon be replaced by the inimical mobile as a sanity-threatening device, it concludes;<sup>xiii</sup>

Within a few months, it was announced that the Hollywood studio Weinstein Company was planning to buy the script from Kumar, validating what a number of people in the media had called a ‘new direction not only in Indian horror but in horror ideas across the world.’<sup>xiv</sup>

Manohar (Mahadevan) and his family (which includes his wife, mother, brother, brother’s wife and two kids) have just shifted to a swanky new flat in a building. Right from the beginning, small things seem to be going oddly wrong in the flat – the milk gets sour everyday, no nails can be bored into walls to hang deity pictures, and inexplicable tiny accidents occur every second day. It seems to be particularly odd for Manohar specifically - the building lift never works when he tries using it alone, while it plies fine for everyone else, and electricity switches suddenly seem to not work when he’s handling them. He begins to actually get worried when he realizes that whenever he takes a picture of himself with his cellphone within the premises of the house the picture comes distorted whereas everyone else’s picture from that very cellphone seems to get captured just fine. The real trouble however begins when one day Manohar stumbles upon a daily soap called *Sab Khairiyat Hai* (he doesn’t really stumble upon it, the TV gets automatically switched on at 13:00 hours everyday for the show, and for the next 30 minutes the remote control get mysteriously deactivated). Soon Manohar realizes that the soap (which has characters almost mirroring those in his family) has a storyline that predicts exactly what is about to happen to his own family. Things soon take a sinister turn; the television soap shows the younger wife having a terrible accident and a subsequent miscarriage. And surely enough, Manohar’s wife Priya (Neetu Chandra) also has a fatal accident that causes a miscarriage. Manohar goes to a family friend Dr Shinde (Sachin Khedekar) who has some sort of knowledge of paranormal activities; he advises him to try and find out exactly what it is the ghosts inside his TV are trying to communicate to him. Within a few days, Manohar is led to discover a photo album buried deep in his compound garden. Inside, he’s shocked to find pictures dated from thirty years ago—1977—of the people he sees on the show everyday, looking just the same as they do now. Extremely alarmed at the growing accidents the soap seems to be predicting, Manohar and his police inspector friend Shiva (Manohar refuses to tell his whole family about the ordeal, given that he and his

brother have taken a hefty loan from the bank to buy this house and they have no option but to stay in it) go to a newspaper archive to search for events around the time the photo is dated. Manohar soon recognizes the photo of one of the characters in the serial in the paper. It turns out that the girl Chitra was a famous news reporter thirty years ago who lived with her mother (Suhasini Mulay), brothers Ganesh and Mohan (Amat Upadhyay) and Ashok (Deepak Dobriyal), their wives and kids in 13B Kailash Vihar (in the same place Manohar's building was built on). On the day of Chitra's wedding, a young eccentric man calling himself Sai Ram comes to their house, insisting that he loves Chitra and watches her on the TV news everyday and he wants to marry her. Chitra's brothers shoo him away, and that night the news of Sai Ram's suicide comes. Within days of Sai Ram's suicide, Chitra and her whole family (barring the mentally ill brother Ashok) are murdered. The police arrest Ashok, given that he's the only person present in the house, and all possible evidence points to him. Discovering all this via old newspaper reports Manohar and Shiv try and find the asylum in which Ashok is still kept.

*Sab Khairiyat Hai* however has an episode in which the whole family gets brutally hammered to death (just like Chitra's family was 30 years ago). Frantically worried about his family, Shiva rushes to Dr. Shinde giving him air-tickets for his family to leave 13B and requests him to personally hand the tickets to his family. When Dr Shinde reaches Manohar's house late in the night, the TV suddenly starts playing. Chitra appears on screen, and addresses Shinde directly – accusing him of their murders and the unjust indictment of their brother Ashok. It is then revealed that Chitra's lover Sai Ram, who had committed suicide was actually Dr. Shinde's younger brother. After Sai Ram committed suicide, Shinde decided to avenge his death killing those he thought responsible. Stunned by the sudden appearance of people he had killed years ago, Dr. Shinde starts breaking the TV screen with a hammer. As Manohar's family comes rushing to the living room at the sound of the commotion, they see a crazed Dr. Shinde hammering away at the TV. Shinde however starts hallucinating. Just as he advances towards the family with the hammer (like he had all those years ago) Manohar reaches the flat. Seeing the whole scene, he attacks Shinde with a sledgehammer, killing him.

The film ends with everything back to normal, all the electronic appliances seem to be running just fine, and the spectral presences seem to have left 13B.

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In *13B* terror does indeed have a new address. The site of the ghostly shifts from the body to the TV, as the latter becomes a complex form of the body-screen.<sup>xv</sup> Before investigating this it is necessary to see it in consonance with the context of urban television spectatorship practices in India. By the year 2002, a spate of daily family soaps with staggering TRPs had become the defining face of Indian primetime television.<sup>xvi</sup> Shows like *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki*, *Kasautii Zindaagi Kii*, *Kkusum* etc became enormously popular, while the lead characters Tulsi (Smriti Irani), Mihir (Amar Upadhyay), Parvati (Sakshi Tanwar), *Kusum* were a national rage. These serials cemented a certain style of presentation that became a sort of template for Indian television at large, while at the same time becoming a common and widely identifiable source of spoofs and deliberately exaggerated re-makes. The dramatic acting, loud background scores, frequent double-takes in editing, extremely long (and often incredulous) story lines congealed into a sort of widely known social stereotype of Hindu upper class family relations. These shows (largely about intra-family moral crises and tribulations) were supposedly targeted at female audiences, who were known to have formed intense emotional relations with them.<sup>xvii</sup>

It is this larger matrix of melodramatic content, style and the recent history of emotional reception that the ghosts in *13B* seem to strategically tap into. They seem to very closely emulate the intricacies of the syntax and performative address typical of the deluge of similar shows that flooded TV channels around the time. The syrupy title song, the opening montage of a regular happy family the distinctively flat high-key lighting, the dramatic editing, the preponderance of slow zoom-in shots and the hammed up style of performances seem to have the exact ingredients of a show undistinguishable from any of the numerous popular serials produced by Balaji Telefilms at the time.

Ironically it is Dr. Shinde (the solitary voice that calls for a reasoned consideration of the supernatural in the film) who first explains the logic of TV sets being the next abode for ghostly presences in the film. He says:

What is the most complicated machine in the world? It's the human body, there's nothing more complicated than a human body, and who knows this better than a doctor. If it's said that a spirit has possessed a complicated machine like a human being everyone believes it, but if it's said that the spirit has possessed an ordinary machine like a TV no one is prepared to believe it. Anyway, why do these lost souls do this – the lost souls need a medium to contact the real world. So why not a television, change is not for the humans alone but for the spirits as well. Time changes for everyone.

The first interesting idea Shinde moots in this small exchange is that of television being just another (in fact easier) medium-body to inhabit, through which the spirits try to communicate with the real world; dissolving through this explanation the usual binary opposition set up between the supernatural and the scientific. Secondly, he suggests that just like our everyday material climates change in their constitution as everything becomes technological, the material artillery of the uncanny also changes. Technology therefore, Dr. Shinde argues, should not be perceived as the habitat that erases the supernatural but one that just changes its mode of articulation.

But as the screen replaces the biological body, various categories start collapsing. The annexed television becomes a sort of interzone – an eerily permeable zone between the past and the present, the image and the body, the ghosts and the living (and in some senses the virtual and the analog). The family-melodrama form allows the spectral family-in-crisis to be contemporary and forges communication with the family of the present. Soon an ominous link is formed between the television family and the real family, as the virtual image becomes a scarily clairvoyant (and frightfully accurate) doppelganger for real bodies. Accidents involving bodies in virtual space start playing themselves out through similarly fatal incidents in the real – real bodies get flung in the air following the lead of their cathode-ray counterparts, people get pummeled in the head with sledgehammers; all seemingly at the behest of the television prognosis. Concrete physiognomic masses become increasingly surrogate to a conflation between the virtual and the ghostly.

The crisis in *13B* can also be read in terms of a conflict between analog and the digital. The digital world of copies of the past (themselves copying a popular form of the present) threatens to explode into the real and usurp the present, the image almost entirely overtaking and re-materializing the body of the spectator. Spectatorship then, becomes a fairly complex terrain in the universe of *13B*. In an insightful comment about the genesis of the film's script, director Vikram Kumar revealed:

During the 2006 elections in Tamil Nadu, one political party promised to give 20 kilograms of rice free every month, 10 sovereigns of gold free for their daughters' wedding and also a computer free. Not to be outdone, the opponent promised to give everyone, if they were elected, a free television set. Guess who won? The one promising the TV set! People would rather go without food, without getting their daughters' married off and without providing their children proper education, than doing without their daily dose of the idiot box. This got me thinking. My story is a social commentary too. I feel a lot of people will relate to the story. *13B/Yaavarum Nalam* is my effort of spinning an interesting yarn around the TV, using a typical Indian family with its fascination for home grown soaps, as the backdrop.<sup>xviii</sup>

Interesting to read in conjunction with this is the beginning of the film's synopsis available on the Internet Movie Database website IMDB.com:

In today's world, the major source of relief, information and entertainment is the TV. So much so, that it has moved up from its modest position of being just another 'household appliance' to actually determining the power equation in a family. It is easy to identify the hierarchy in the family depending on who controls the remote control. So what happens when the TV begins to take control? What happens when instead of showing you the facts, the TV, begins to show you what it wants you to see? What happens when Manohar, to his great horror, realizes that this is exactly what is happening with his family, who has just moved into their new home at 13B?<sup>xix</sup>

The obsessive 'desire' projected towards television content, particularly in the form of the frenzied mass following of daily soaps in recent years gets perversely distorted into a grotesque extreme in *13B*. Obsessive viewership becomes forced viewership - this is a TV show you *have* to watch, because it comes on automatically at 1300 hours everyday, during which time the TV cannot be shut off. As the only member of the family who is not an avid television watcher, it is ironic that the possessed TV chooses Manohar for its hyper-spectatorship paradigm. From the beginning the house is shown to have a typically robust culture of TV viewership. The kids insist on going late to school so they

can finish watching their cartoon shows, the women in the house are compulsive daily soap consumers<sup>xx</sup> - the mother passionately discusses TV shows on the phone with friends, the two wives come to mock wrestle with Manohar barely at his suggestion that the cable connection should be given up. The film in fact establishes this avid following not as an unusual condition specific to this family, but a universal one (inspector Shiva jokes about how his wife refuses to even budge to answer the door once her favorite shows are on.) At the heart of the fear *13B* manages to strike is in the idea of the incompetent TV viewer – a recalcitrant TV set that refuses to abide. In his discussion of Gore Verbinski's cult horror film *The Ring* (2002) about a cursed video tape whose viewers die within seven days of watching it, Chuck Tyron argues that in a number of television horror films “tension derives from a desire to impose control over the video image, playing with the dynamics of horror film spectatorship, the passivity or activity of the *film* viewer” (Tyron, 2009: 48). A large part of the horror in *13B* is also about the incapacity of the viewer as the TV runs its own errands, beyond any human comprehension.

Interestingly, television spectatorship is also central to the lives (and death) of the spectral family of the past that now parades as the TV soap family everyday at 13:00 hours. In a small sepia tinted flashback section we're introduced to the lives of the spectral family back on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1977, on a day a television set is brought to their home for the first time. The installation of the black and white television is a major event, as scores of intrigued people from the neighborhood congregate outside their courtyard to watch, as the younger son Mohan (Amar Upadhyay) struggles to find the antennae signal on the terrace of their flat.<sup>xxi</sup> The experience of the television itself clearly belongs to an entirely different regime of materiality (which the film painstakingly details) – where the outer form, the large cumbersome wooden body of the TV seems to become the focus of various rituals. The set is neatly sheathed in a wooden box adorned with two drawable curtains in front of it, akin to erstwhile cinema halls where curtains would part to announce the beginning of the film. Like other purely physical, tangible objects such as cars, houses and large furniture, the television becomes the momentary physical altar in front of which incense sticks are lit, ‘*aarti*’ is done, and inaugural prayers are read out. We're then told that the TV set has been

bought so that the family can watch a news show together in which the youngest daughter works as a newscaster. As the bustling neighborhood crowd outside is invited inside to watch the TV, the two brothers also bring out Ashok (Deepak Dobriyal) their mentally ill brother to watch their sister on the new TV. While Ashok gets excited as he sees his sister Chitra on the screen, he begins getting very agitated as hoards of new alien faces enter their new house to see the TV. He gets a sort of nervous fit wherein he yells and tries throwing things at the new faces, and his elder brothers Mohan and Ganesh have to forcefully whisk him away and lock him in his room. The whole family (barring Ashok, who's found bathed in blood and is indicted as the prime suspect) gets murdered within a few days, bludgeoned ruthlessly to death with a hammer.

The cause of Chitra's family's death is also (albeit indirectly) an obsessive form of television spectatorship. Sai Ram's fanatic desire to consume the television image that he "*sees everyday*" (and an inability to separate the referent from the real) leads to his suicide; and subsequently to the gruesome murder of the whole family as Shinde ruthlessly clubs them to death. The *13B* universe is an oddly simulacral order - it is a fetishistic love for Chitra's TV simulation that warrants Sai Ram's suicide and in extension Chitra's family's demise; the murdered family's spectral simulations then become copies themselves of regular fictitious TV families, who in turn machinate their revenge by making the Manohar's family a copy of them. Television becomes the ambit within which this whole ethic of *copying* repeatedly plays itself out, the collapse of the TV image and real bodies always inevitably leading to cadaverous repercussions. It is no surprise then that in this world of endless television specters, the only believable evidence of authentic origins lies in a physical/chemical form of indexical representation – the photograph.

On different occasions in *13B* it is the photograph that reveals the impregnably concealed 'truths' underneath the artifice of the television image. Manohar and Shiva discover the actual spectral force bolstering '*Sab Khairiyat Hai*' after they discover a photo album consisting of photos of Chitra's family that is dated 1977. The photographic alone can reveal the true historical 'faces' of the myriad simulated people inside the otherwise impenetrably counterfeited television image. The revelatory power

of the photographic is essential not only for the film's characters but also for the extra knowledge provided to *13B*'s actual viewers. The very first time the women in Manohar's family stumble upon the serial '*Sab Khairiyat hai*', the title credit ends with a frontal long shot of the whole family (the mother, her two sons, their wives and the two kids). Before the shot fades out, the camera starts panning away from the TV screen, only to come to rest at a photo-frame of Manohar and his family kept nearby. Vikram Kumar's film audience is made privy to information in this moment that the film's characters are not – the picture of Manohar's family and the last shot of the title sequence are mirror images of each other. The photographic thus provides cues hinting at television's subterfuge both within *13B*'s diegetic world and outside it.

In a way Ashok's crazed hatred for the television (he's found bashing the television set with a large sledgehammer the morning after the murder) perhaps comes from a subliminal realization that Chitra's TV image is in some way implicated in the bloodbath in his house. The television is also to a large degree responsible for Ashok's unfair indictment and long incarceration in the mental hospital (his neighbors recall his frenzied outburst in front of them on the day the TV first brought to the house, and speculate that Ashok must've killed his family in a similar burst of rage against the television). 30 years later, Ashok (in a far exacerbated mental condition) is discovered in an asylum drawing pictures of TV like boxes with his blood on the walls of his cell, suggesting that he is aware of his former family 'existing' still within the television set they were actually killed for, over 20 years ago. The relationship of the TV with the past is a complexly fraught category in *13B*.

Sangita Gopal contends that old Ramsay films always "interred" the demonic presence in pre-modern sites (like villages, forests, distant run down towns and so on) and would usually involve the protagonists journeying back from an urban locale to a rural hinterland in order to confront the evil (Gopal 2012:106).<sup>xxii</sup> Unlike this paradigm which usually nests in retrospective mode from a long past, *New Horror* is "ineluctably joined to futurity" (Gopal 2012, 107). The horror in the new films is actually triggered by the protagonist's ardent desire for a future. Manohar's family is literally bound to the flat (as is repeatedly mentioned in the film) because the two brothers have taken a hefty

loan to purchase the flat and expect to repay it only after twenty years of monthly installments. Manohar's family's primary impulse like most post-liberalization middle class Indian society is to aggressively acquire and invest in the hope of a better future, irrespective of what the history of the asset is. The capital market exists in an inexorably unchanging 'now', a pure present propelled solely by incentive considerations, where all historical contexts and past narratives get nullified. The nucleated family unit also functions primarily in the temporality of the present, disavowing notions of collective lineage, heritage and shared histories that the joint family structure inherently espoused. Inhabiting the haunted house is for all these nucleated families an economic and existential ethic. The ghostly TV show plays on this, showing a family's daily vagaries as it shifts into its dream house.

The televisual uncanny seems to spill into a sort of network of ghosted technological objects. The everyday material life of a regular upper-middle class house is used in invoking a sense of impending menace in *13B* too.<sup>xxiii</sup> The entire film is peppered quite generously with point-of-view shots—shots which seem like they're taken from the point of view of inanimate objects (like the introductory shot of Manohar's mother who's seen opening a cupboard from the perspective of the cupboard's interior, or of Priya pouring tea into a cup that we see through the point of view of the cup.) The conspicuously frequent use of these shots give a strangely menacing sense to the whole material life inside the flat, as if the objects themselves are in a quiet unison watching the characters every second. This sense of the inanimate having an eerie sort of will and consciousness gets increasingly accentuated throughout the first half of the film. The building lift (like in *Bhoot*) seems to have a definitive will of its own, refusing to move when Manohar takes it alone while working perfectly for everyone else, the electricity too seems in on it: jolting the driller who comes to drill a hole to put the deity pictures up, bulbs refuse to turn off etc. The first evidence Manohar gets of some sort of an unholy presence is through his cellphone – he notices that any picture of his that he shoots inside the flat gets distorted while stepping even a foot outside the flat seems to make the phone work just fine. It is only after he confirms this phenomenon by physically testing it himself, that he becomes certain of there being something wrong with the flat. It is only after this whole prologue and build-up that the

television switches itself on, and Manohar witnesses the serial for the first time. The technological paraphernalia in other words subtly preempts and prepares for this new spectatorial body to be created.

The horror however heightens manifold as Manohar discovers that the show has no production history or set up anywhere. As he discovers the show's name listed in the TV schedule section in a newspaper, he rushes to the studio wherein the show *Sab Khairiyat Hai* is supposedly produced. On reaching there, he realizes that *Sab Khairiyat Hai* is a talk show hosted by Roshan Abbas, entirely unlike the family soap he sees on TV everyday. Horrified at the prospect of what he is up against, Manohar rushes to a TV store, putting on the channel on which the show comes everyday on a plethora of TVs strewn across the showroom. As the clock strikes 1 o'clock, it's the Roshan Abbas show that comes across a multitude of screens, not the show he watches on that very channel at that very time everyday. The horror of the TV show is that it is self-creating: a digital entity that can programme and generate itself in the standardized model without a real external referent, without an airwave, designing itself singularly for the residents of flat number 13B.

The only time the television presence takes real tangible form is in Dr Shinde's imagination in the end. Chitra directly addresses Shinde when he comes to 13B; excoriating him for their gruesome murders and the fate he imposed upon Ashok in the process. Petrified at seeing these ancient apparitions of his past on the television, Shinde takes a hammer and busts the screen of the television, repeatedly striking it like one assumes he struck the actual bodies of the family members all those years ago. The physical desecration of the television screen (the current 'body-medium' of the spirits) has a peculiar effect. The television breaks and goes blank and the apparitions disappear, only to re-house themselves in other objects. As Manohar's family wake up at the commotion and rush out, they walk-in on the odd site of their venerated Shinde Uncle dementedly pummeling the television set with a hammer. What Shinde however sees on turning around is not Manohar's family but Chitra's old family members. This is an interesting moment, the physical destruction of the television screen by Shinde (in a manner reminiscent of his actual hammer murders years ago) results for the first and

only time in the film in the spectral family coming out into the real space of the flat. They don't however take actual tangible form, but get superimposed within Shinde's imagination on the real bodies of Manohar's family. The TV images finally 'come out' and merge indistinguishably with the spectator's body, transforming the spectator's body itself into a source of unmitigated fear. The TV legacy however reaches its final apotheosis only when Manohar reaches at the nick of time and beats Shinde to death with a sledgehammer. The final conclusion thus, is reached only when the perfect analogous simulation of the virtual finally commits the requisite act of justice, when the spectators mimic and play out virtual revenge within the actual physical precincts of the flat. In other words only when the flat 13B itself functions momentarily as a large television screen.

The film thus reaches a quintessential 'happy ending' only when the 'family crisis' long plaguing 13B gets finally resolved and the fragments in the spectral family get sutured. Chitra's family can peacefully vacate the premises only when the youngest son Ashok, gets re-united with a new surrogate family. The ending also gestures towards a final conflation between the real and the spectral family, as Manohar's family now substitutes Chitra's as Ashok's family. The deity statues and pictures can now go up on the wall, the television, the cellphone and the lift work just fine for Manoj, and the shadow of the uncanny seems to have generally passed from the house. The film however ends on what seems like something of a mock ending – as Manoj gets into the lift, he gets a call from Dr Shinde's cell number. As he answers the phone, a dead Dr Shinde speaks up – telling him that from this generation onwards, ghosts will communicate to the real world via cellphones. The film ends with a shocked Manoj staring at the phone, as the camera zooms into what seems the next site of terror in 13B – the cellphone.

As television sets increasingly become part of the inconspicuous material skin of our quotidian lives, the psychic sphere gets replaced by this sound-image producing technology as the site where the uncanny suddenly erupts and manifests itself. Like in the case of the MMS viewer the TV viewer's body begins to transform: the body-screen now becomes the screen within which these flights of uncanny fancy stoke most wind.

While *Ragini MMS* explored the changing relationship between the travelling contraband digital image and its producer/consumer; *13B* looks at the changing relationship between TV and its viewer in this larger context of digital images. The TV viewer's body is now always in jeopardy, constantly threatened by the apparitional presences in the TV that seem on the verge of spilling into the real world and subjugating real bodies into becoming copies or simulations of the images themselves. But unlike Cronenberg's tales, the New Bombay Horror doesn't advocate the destruction of the technology itself, it suggests instead that specters need to be heard out, and their plea for justice satiated. What it calls for then, is not for a confrontation with the screen, but just for us to watch our shows closer.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> See – 2008, Sanjay K Singh, 'eBay chief moves SC in DPS MMS case' *Economic Times*, Aug 13. Available at [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2008-08-13/news/28457096\\_1\\_video-clip-ebay-apex-court](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2008-08-13/news/28457096_1_video-clip-ebay-apex-court), accessed on June 4<sup>th</sup>2012

Also see – 2010, Manjima Bhattacharjya, 'Redefining Rape', , May. Available at <http://infochangeindia.org/women/third-wave/redefining-rape.html>, accessed on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012

<sup>ii</sup> 2007, Nishant Shah, 'PLAYBLOG: PORNOGRAPHY, PERFORMANCE AND CYBERSPACE' Available at <http://www.networkcultures.org/uploads/24.pdf>, accessed on June 4<sup>th</sup>2012

<sup>iii</sup> See 'Indian Celebs in MMS scandals' at ndtv.com (<http://www.ndtv.com/album/listing/entertainment/indian-celebs-in-mms-scandals-7193/slide/21>) (Accessed June 5<sup>th</sup> 2012)

Also see- 2012, Manash Gohain, 'Porn MMS goes viral in Jawaharlal Nehru University, 3 suspended', June 4. Available at [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-06-04/delhi/32030891\\_1\\_h-b-bohidar-s-k-sopory-mms](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-06-04/delhi/32030891_1_h-b-bohidar-s-k-sopory-mms), accessed June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012

<sup>iv</sup> 2011, Siddharth Jain , '*Indian youth is not just ready for a zombie film, it is demanding one*', September 12th Available at [http://www.tehelka.com/story\\_main50.asp?filename=Ws120911Cinema.asp](http://www.tehelka.com/story_main50.asp?filename=Ws120911Cinema.asp), accessed on- June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012. Siddharth Jain is part of a production company that produces graphic novels and films around zombies, super heroes and comic books.

<sup>v</sup> Interview with author, July, 2012.

<sup>vi</sup> In his interviews about the film Rajkumar Yadav who plays Uday repeatedly mentions that while he's in *this film* "he always feels bad for the women whose MMS' get made and circulated uncontrollably through cellphones and porn clips online."

<sup>vii</sup> The film opens with a male hand (of the person recording the video) loudly pounding on an apartment door. A young sleepy girl (who we later discover is Ragini's roommate) opens the door. The camera quickly tilts down to zoom into the room-mate's legs as she peevishly tells the camera that Ragini's sleeping. The camera (held by Uday, who the film hasn't established till this point) however shoves the room mate aside and strides in towards Ragini's room, with the roommate shrieking and desperately trying to stop him from behind. The camera enters Ragini's room, parts the curtains, zooms into Ragini's cleavage and then tries to shake Ragini awake. As the roommate tries to intervene the camera presence clutches the roommate by the arm, literally pushes her out and locks the door. Uday then picks up a bottle and throws water at Ragini, jostling her into the bathroom to get ready. We see Uday properly only when the two of them are in the car driving to their holiday spot, as they kiss in the car (at which point he again surreptitiously switches the camera on) or as they stop by at places to eat, shop, laze around in a beach. As he gets to the 'location', he rushes to a store room in a desolate corner of the house, turning on a multi-screen console that controls all the hidden cameras strewn all across the house.

<sup>viii</sup> Further strengthening this sense of a potential MMS video in the offing is the conspicuous intertextual links the film draws with Ekta Kapoor's earlier film '*Love Sex aur Dhokha*'. Raj Kumar Gupta plays Adarsh, a character not too unlike Uday, who is also similarly bent on somehow making a surreptitious sex video with a girlfriend after a friend gives him a glimpse of the money prospects involved. At other points Uday is shown listening to songs from '*Love Sex aur Dhokha*', particularly the song '*Tu Nangi acchi lagti hai*' (I like you when you are naked- an overtly misogynistic song sung by a distinctly rapacious character called Loki in LSD) right before he expects to have sex with Ragini.

<sup>ix</sup> If the ghost in the film can actually be read as a perverse form of a cleansing moral female energy (that kills the lascivious male character and punishes the woman for imprudence) *Ragini MMS* mobilizes two conventionally stock female characters in horror films. It constructs the woman victim of the horror as well as the monstrous-feminine, both well-established presences in the history of the horror film. "Women" as Robin Wood argues have always been the focus of threat and assault in the horror films" where "teenagers are punished for promiscuity" and any form of persuasive sexual expression (Wood 1987:81) gets violently chastized.

<sup>x</sup> In many of these films, as Tania Modleski argues "the female is attacked not only because she embodies sexual pleasures but because she represents great many aspects of specious good" (Modleski 1986: 772).

<sup>xi</sup> The spectral presence therefore, has to not only kill off Uday, but also (alongside the three other murders in the house) the technician Panditji sends to fit the whole surveillance system in the house (Ragini stumbles upon his body later on in the console room).

<sup>xii</sup> Kartik Nair *Ramsay Brothers: The Men, The Movies, The Memory* Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, 2010. Also See Gopal (2012).

<sup>xiii</sup> See *13B Review*: 2009, Nikhat Kazmi, "Times Of India 5<sup>th</sup> March. Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

<sup>xiv</sup> Also See- 2009, Joginder Tuteja, 'Hollywood shows interest in Hindi horror film '13B'. 17<sup>th</sup> March.

Available at <http://www.bollywood.com/hollywood-shows-interest-hindi-horror-film-13b>, accessed on June 12<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>xv</sup> A long standing stock situation in horror films (that has endured across older and newer paradigms) is the theme of 'possession': in a number of the New Horror films (*Raat, Bhoot, Phoonk, 1920*) a central female character gets 'possessed' by aggressive spirit-like forces. The body of the woman then becomes like a pure screen, an exteriority on which the spiritual force can inscribe meanings to be communicated to the people around her

<sup>xvi</sup> Smitha Verma, "If it's Arushi, it's got to be a serial", *The Telegraph*, July 6<sup>th</sup> 2008. Available at [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080706/jsp/7days/story\\_9510390.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080706/jsp/7days/story_9510390.jsp), accessed on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>xvii</sup> There was a huge backlash against the abrupt death of the character Mihir from *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*. 2001, Report, "Dead Man Walking: Amar Upadhyay". Available at [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2001-07-13/mumbai/27229406\\_1\\_mihir-virani-television-serial-kyunki-saas-amar-upadhyay](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2001-07-13/mumbai/27229406_1_mihir-virani-television-serial-kyunki-saas-amar-upadhyay), accessed on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2012.

<sup>xviii</sup> 2009, Interview,, "13B/Yaavarum Nalam is my effort of spinning an interesting yarn around the TV" *Rediff.com*, 4<sup>th</sup> March. Available at <http://www.rediff.com/movies/2009/mar/03slde3-director-vikram-on-13b.htm>, accessed on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2012

<sup>xix</sup> See – 2009 13B: movie synopsis (Uploaded by Anonymous) Available at (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1385824/>) . (Accessed on June 6<sup>th</sup>)

<sup>xx</sup> The film infact does tremendous disservice to nearly all its female characters – not only is the stereotype of women as hapless melodrama admirers strongly reinforced, the women in 13B seem to be plain asinine in their inability to see the glaring commonalities between ‘*Sab Khairiyat hai*’ and their own lives despite closely watching it everyday, while Manohar is able to spot the uncanny overlap in just one accidental viewing.

<sup>xxi</sup> The film very cleverly deploys an extra cinematic reference here, the younger brother in *Sab Khairiyat Hai* is played by Amar Upashyay the actor who earlier played *Mihir* in *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*.

<sup>xxii</sup> The Ramsay monster’s temporality then was essentially always of the past (Gopal, 106). The originary event when the evil (demon/curse/spirit or all of these together) has its genesis is usually relegated to a distant past from centuries ago.

<sup>xxiii</sup> The unblemished and laundered new flat in *13B* starts imposing spectral signs on the family from the very first day of shifting in. The walls remain obstinate in not allowing pictures of gods and deities to be put up, as Manohar and his brother keep trying to hammer nails in, without being able to dent a single hole. Milk goes sour every single day, while water seepage patterns seem to form in the walls that take on ominous and scary shapes. No matter how much it is forced, the neighbor’s dog refuses to (literally) set foot inside the flat, clearly alarmed by the presence of strongly unpleasant forces in it. Despite at no point being shown any actual visions of ghosts or specters the house in all its innocuous tidiness soon assumes a palpably sinister charge, a distinctive ominous character of its own.

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