

Colombo on a Motorcycle: Unravelling Wellbeing in a City through the Cinematic Everyday

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Abstract

Cinema inhabits urban culture and often represents and narrate urban space through its visual multi-dimensionality. This paper discusses the various degrees of *cityness* present in films and argues that notions of the *Everyday* connect cinema, urbanity, and wellbeing. As a holistic parameter of health that captures both psychological and physiological wellness, wellbeing is posited an excellent all-encompassing determinant of how cities are appropriated and experienced. Subjective wellbeing—rooted in the everyday constructs of *feeling good* (hedonic wellbeing) and *functioning well* (eudaimonic wellbeing)—is shaped by circumstantial factors, activities, and practices. This paper links the everydayness of wellbeing with cinema, proposing film as a potential medium to discern the wellbeing conduciveness of cities. It investigates cinema's capacity to generate *objective knowledge* (raw material), *semantic knowledge* (the spectator's interpretation), and *cinematic intelligence* (a further interpretation of the spectator's interpretation), to derive a holistic understanding of wellbeing. The psychogeography of a selected film is traversed, leveraging cinema's ability to direct the *voyageur's* gaze. Thus, as a pilot study, this paper confirms cinema as a promising tool for architects and urban designers to evaluate wellbeing in cities, transcending mere technical awareness.

Keywords

Cinema, City, Wellbeing, Everyday Life, Film Analysis

1. Introduction

Cinema and architecture, as two overlapping art forms, have been investigated by

various philosophers, sociologists, and architects from diverse perspectives and with varied intents. Bruno (1997: p. 2) establishes that cinema inhabits “modernity’s (moving) urban culture” through the intentional narration of urban space, facilitated by the idiosyncratic connection between architecture and film. This connection has been well established since Sergei M. Eisenstein’s pioneering exploration of film’s architectonics in his study of “Montage and Architecture.” According to Eisenstein (1938: p. 117), the representation of a phenomenon in its full visual multi-dimensionality is possible through film and architecture alike. He even identifies architecture as “film’s undoubted ancestor” and investigates the Acropolis of Athens as the perfect example of one of the most ancient films.

Bruno (2002: p. 15) extends Eisenstein’s shot-by-shot revelation of architecture to the “multiform practice of geopsychic exploration” of tours and detours, turns and re-turns taken by the film spectator, *or voyageur* to navigate the “delicate cartography of *emotion* [...] Traversing the psychogeography of film, shifting through the grounds of socio-cultural mobilities [...] to design an atlas of emotion pictures”. This narrative establishes an overlap in the practice of these two distinctly different art forms, yet the most important observation is noted as cinema’s ability to inhabit urban culture through its appropriation of urban space. From an urban planning perspective, Edelman (2016: p. 140) argues that “cinema has a very special role in promoting the understanding and ultimate solution of urban ills.”

This paper, as a pilot study, posits wellbeing as an excellent all-encompassing determinant of how cities are experienced and links it with cinema through notions of the *Everyday* to present a framework for exploring cinema as a useful investigative tool depending on the degree of *cityness* present in a film.

The selected film, *Motorbicycle* (2016), set in Colombo, Sri Lanka, thematically depicts the aspirations and dispossession of working-class youth in the city through the narrative arc of the main character, Rangana. A youth from a *watta* (an urban shanty community) Rangana hustles to improve his lot in life. The film unveils how the socio-economic constructs of the city—shaping the everyday life of its citizens—foreground various urban settings. Inhabiting urban culture through a distinct appropriation of space, the film explores the intricate interplay between space and social usage in this Global South city. The innocence of Rangana’s dreams collides with the urban conditions of Colombo, acting as a negative protagonist. The cinematic experience navigates the voyageur through the nuanced aspects of wellbeing in the city, and as they “traverse the psychogeography of the film, shifting through the grounds of socio-cultural mobilities” (Bruno, 2002), an assortment of otherwise elusive, enigmatic, and obscure urban ills are revealed.

2. Cinema, Wellbeing and the City

Wellbeing as a scholarly concept encapsulates the multi-dimensional constructs of an individual’s physiological and psychological health and wellness. It includes psychological aspects (“feeling good”—*hedonic wellbeing*) and physiological aspects (“functioning well”—*eudaimonic wellbeing*). It is accepted as an important

indicator that underpins the progress of nations, and it can be deduced as the ultimate intent behind the formation and development of cities and urban environments. Research on wellbeing is extensive, encompassing studies at both the individual and societal levels. For example, [Stewart-Brown et al. \(2011\)](#) proposed the widely used Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), a 14-item scale with five response categories covering both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of wellbeing, and [Huppert & So \(2013\)](#) developed frameworks for assessing wellbeing across populations to discern characteristics of flourishing nations.

Subjective and individual to each person, wellbeing is an everyday state or measurement of feeling good and functioning well. An individual's perception of wellbeing at any point in time is a personal evaluation of a collection of everyday engagements and occurrences. In this sense, the *Everyday* underpins wellbeing. [Penz \(2017\)](#) has explored multiple investigations of the Everyday by prolific theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, Georges Perec, and others to deduce definitions of the quotidian as it relates to cinema¹. According to [Lefebvre \(2014: p. 341\)](#) the Everyday is “[...] existence and the “lived”, revealed as they are. [...] In one sense there is nothing more simple and more obvious than everyday life. [...] And in yet another sense nothing could be more profound. [It is] what must be changed and what is the hardest of all to change.” Lefebvre refers to the banality, triviality, and repetitiveness of everyday life (or the quotidian), yet also points to the profoundness of this simplicity. He identifies the Everyday as what underpins movements for change, and this view reveals that the Everyday underpins wellbeing and possibilities to enhance or inhibit it.

François Penz's insightful narration deduces that cinema and architecture reflect each other's gaze on the Everyday. This serves as a proxy for this paper to discern wellbeing in the city through cinema. Reading and representing cities is usually a complex and difficult task. It has been approached from multiple perspectives, mainly the artistic approach that privileges the visual experience and the social usage approach that attempts to discern behavioral and perceptual appropriations of urban space ([Jarvis, 1980](#)). Since the latter half of the 20th century, urban studies have increasingly embraced combined perspectives and mixed methods in research and design, integrating deductive and inductive approaches to urban analysis. This shift recognizes urban life—both in the physical environment and that of its users—as organic, diverse, and incremental. For example, [Rowe & Koetter \(1984\)](#)'s *Collage City* challenged the deterministic assumptions of modernist city planning, advocating for historical layering to foster a more diverse and perceptual engagement with the city. *Collage City* thus offers a visual-artistic response to the urban issues caused by overly rational planning approaches.

The “linkages between form and purpose” explored by [Lynch \(1984\)](#) in *Good City Form* are explicitly grounded in perceptual and performance considerations.

¹In *Cinematic Aided Design: An Everyday Life Approach to Architecture* (2017), François Penz makes a compelling argument for mining cinema frames to understand architecture in use, or more specifically, identifying cinema as an accidental archive of spaces in use to inform post-occupancy analysis.

In *The Image of the City* (Lynch, 1960: p. 3), a precursor to this tradition of urban studies, he states, “We must consider not just the city as a thing in itself but the city being perceived by its inhabitants,” emphasizing that there may be a difference between the city itself and the city being perceived. This approach situates the experience of the city within the context of the Everyday, where, as Lynch notes, “Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the series of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences.” (Lynch, 1960: p. 1) Responses to this branch of urban studies, which advocate for an empirical understanding of cities as appropriated by their inhabitants, tend to be quantitative, data-driven, and resource-intensive. However, they often remain unidimensional, failing to fully grasp the nuanced complexities of urban life as it is experienced.

The distinction between the city itself and how the city is perceived in everyday life remains a challenging concept to unravel. Kevin Lynch’s description of urban life—“On different occasions and for different people, the sequences are reversed, interrupted, abandoned, cut across. It is seen in all lights and weathers” (Lynch, 1960: p. 1)—evokes the previously discussed montage technique in cinema, reflecting cinema’s unique ability to represent the Everyday. According to François Penz, “[...] The camera frames reality. It reveals and makes us “see” what is otherwise overlooked. So, in a curious way, [...] film simplifies reality—it makes us notice things, it directs our gaze. [...] film helps us to notice and grasp a “reality” to which we are otherwise blind.” Thus, Cinema presents a valuable lens to understand the environs and realities of a city as experienced by its citizens due to the idiosyncratic connection between Cinema, the Everyday, and wellbeing.

“Cinema and architecture is like a borderless infinite puzzle to which some of us add a piece from time to time, waiting for others to join or to put it another way. “The amateur’s way implies that cinema belongs to all those who have, one way or another, traveled within its system [...] and that everyone is authorized to trace one’s own itinerary within this topography, adding to the cinema as world and to its knowledge” (Rancière, 2011: p. 14, as cited in Penz, 2017: pp. 2-3)

This paper is an attempt to contribute to that borderless puzzle by traversing the psychogeography of cinema to trace a meaningful research method to comprehend the city as it is perceived and appropriated by inhabitants, which transcends mere technical awareness. This paper acknowledges that the challenge is to objectively deduce the subjective matter of a film and that the subject of the film itself can complicate the analysis. This paper argues that as an everyday state, wellbeing can be relied upon as an overarching objective denominator of the quality of urban life as “Wellbeing conduciveness,” which oscillates between urban illbeing and wellbeing. Next, the paper presents a framework to unravel wellbeing in cities through cinema that can at once benefit from and transcend the subjectivity of cinematic narration.

3. Cinematic Urban Observations of Wellbeing

Cinema is verisimilitude. Each frame and each shot are intentionally created for a specific outcome. Due to the verisimilitude nature of cinema, a mechanism for selecting films for wellbeing analysis is required². Such criteria essentially depend on the authentic portrayal of the cine-city as a cinematic reproduction of the real city as a true representation of its nuanced “everyday”.

In *The Real City in the Reel City* (Penz, 2010), François Penz elicits the degree of cityness present in films on three levels; the city as background, the city as a character, and the city as a subject. In *Urban Narrative Layers*, he breaks down the cinematic image into a series of discrete narrative layers; the spatial narrative (buildings), the city planning narrative, the people’s narrative, and the directorial narrative. These investigations reveal that cinema as a tool involves an engagement with its layers of visualization and psychogeography beyond the simple observation of filmed scenes.

Beyond the simple notion of the “moving image”, films imbue a pre-existing reality associated with a social and physical context, within given cultural, political, and environmental circumstances. In *The City in Cinema: A Global Perspective* (Edelman, 2016), David Edelman investigates a range of urban phenomenon as represented in films, such as urban industrialization, class conflict, race and ethnicity, divided or contested cities and immigration. Films cut and re-arrange real-life scenes and contain nuggets of everyday realities. This paper posits that these scenes of everyday encounters, gestures of characters, patterns, behaviors, and the everyday physical environment, moderated by the filmmaker’s gaze, can reveal insights into wellbeing. This requires us to travel within the system of cinema with an artistic appreciation for realism.

The most applicable methodology for wellbeing analysis through film observation is one proposed by François Penz for using cinema as an urban modelling mechanism. Philip Steadman, a specialist in urban and built form studies proposes three worlds to be captured by, or interpreted through models, “World 1,” the objective world of material things, and “World 2,” the subjective world of minds, and “World 3” of objective knowledge. Penz extends this to the cinematic model where World 1—constitutes the raw material of the film, “the observed world”, and World 2—is the filmic interpretation of the spectator, making sense of the filmic information of World 1, deriving “semantic knowledge”. World 3—a world of objective structures that are the products, not necessarily intentional, of minds but which, once produced, exist independently of them is introduced as “cinematic intelligence”.

“In other words, with the cinematic urban modeling concept, we observe the observer—what the camera has recorded—that is to observe by means which are distinct from how the initial observer, the film-maker, constructed her/his subjective reality in the first place. This process can be described as a

²Penz’s argument for having faith in cinema’s ability to direct the voyager’s gaze meaningfully becomes central here.

second-order observation—twice removed from the reality on the ground.” (François Penz’s “Cinema as urban modelling” in Kredell (Penz, 2022: p. 18).

Thus, it is important to define what needs to be observed as “cinematic intelligence” for wellbeing analysis (the purpose of this paper.) For this, wellbeing must first be understood and defined. Wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct that encapsulates an individual’s physiological and psychological health and wellness. Many aspects of perception and life experiences contribute to an individual’s wellbeing, which is referred to as subjective wellbeing (SWB).

The two overarching perspectives of SWB are hedonic and eudaimonic—i.e., relating to “feeling good” and “functioning well”. Scholarship in wellbeing has been approached by both viewpoints and by the combination of the two (e.g. Huppert & So, 2013) From the eudaimonic perspective, factors such as autonomy, integration, self-actualization, positive relationships, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, competence, relatedness, and parameters for a sense of coherence over one’s life; comprehensible, manageable and meaningful—have been proposed as determinants of wellbeing (Jahoda, 1958; Ryff, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Antonovsky, 1993). Aristotle is credited with advocating the combined perspective; a viewpoint followed by several recent scholars. Seligman (2018) hypothesizes PERMA—positive emotion (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A) as the five elements of wellbeing, a combination of both hedonic and eudemonic drivers. Keyes (2002) evaluates emotional wellbeing (happiness or life satisfaction) alongside eudaimonic factors.

Diener et al. (2010) propose “flourishing” as a measure of wellbeing, and Huppert & So (2013) devise an operational definition of “flourishing” using ten determinants. This construct builds on the argument that positive mental health, or “flourishing” as a state of being, is the mirror opposite of mental disorders (Keyes, 2007), and is based on empirical data obtained through the European Social Survey (ESS) administered to 43,000 individuals in 23 countries. The ten determinants are emotional stability, vitality, resilience, optimism, self-esteem, engagement, meaning, competence, positive relationships, life satisfaction, and positive emotion. These are categorized into two baskets, “positive characteristics” comprising the more hedonic factors, and “positive functioning” comprising the more eudemonic factors (Table 1).

Guided by approaches used to establish criteria for mental disorders, the operational definition for “flourishing” involves possessing all but one feature of positive characteristics and all but one feature of positive functioning, together with positive emotion—the only feature that addresses the hedonic aspect of wellbeing. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade (2005) propose that three major factors govern chronic happiness: 1) a genetically determined set point for happiness, 2) happiness-relevant circumstantial factors, and 3) happiness-relevant activities and practices. The set point is a baseline about which a person’s wellbeing fluctuates. This indicates that individuals can intentionally increase wellbeing by engaging in certain activities or cultivating wellbeing habits.

Table 1. Features of “flourishing” and indicator items from the European social survey.

<i>Positive Feature</i>	<i>ESS item used as indicator</i>
<i>Competence</i>	Most days I feel a sense of accomplishment from what I do
<i>Emotional Stability</i>	(In the past week) I felt calm and peaceful
<i>Engagement</i>	I love learning new things
<i>Meaning</i>	I generally feel that what I do in my life is valuable and worthwhile
<i>Optimism</i>	I am always optimistic about my future
<i>Positive Emotion</i>	Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?
<i>Positive Relationships</i>	There are people in my life who really care about me
<i>Resilience</i>	When things go wrong in my life, it generally takes me a long time to get back to normal (Reverse score)
<i>Self-esteem</i>	In general, I feel very positive about myself
<i>Vitality</i>	(In the past week) I had a lot of energy

Wellbeing is determined up to 40% through intentional activities, indicating that individuals have significant potential to consciously enhance their wellbeing, which warrants further investigation. The UK government’s Foresight program (Foresight, 2008) has proposed a “Five-a-day” action strategy to improve wellbeing (Table 2). Anderson et al. (2016) explored the impact of architecture and the built environment on wellbeing, emphasizing how design can facilitate the five ways to wellbeing. For instance, providing attractive circulation routes encourages walking, stair climbing, and social interaction. In *Design of Cities*, Edmund N. Bacon highlights “the joy of anticipation of running up a flight of steps, of the muscular effort to reach the higher level and the feeling of satisfaction when this is achieved,” indicating the positive impact of well-designed level changes and staircases in cities (Bacon, 1976).

Of the five ways to wellbeing, three—“Keep Active,” “Connect,” and “Take Notice”—are directly influenced by the built environment. Similarly, King, Thompson, and Darzi (2014) argue that good architecture can “nudge” people toward wellbeing by offering design-led interventions that create moments of delight and provide opportunities for adaptation. Hatleskog and Samuel (2021)³ use the prompts “Connection,” “Active Lifestyles,” “Positive Emotions,” “Taking Notice,” and “Flexibility and Freedom” as proxies to conduct surveys measuring social value in cities. These concepts align with Kevin Lynch’s performance dimensions for Good City Form: “Vitality,” “Sense,” “Fit,” “Access,” and “Control” (Lynch, 1984), highlighting the relationship

³Eli Hatleskog and Flora Samuel’s article, “Mapping as a Strategic Tool for Evidencing Social Values and Supporting Joined-up Decision-Making in Reading, England” (2021), published in *The Journal of Urban Design* (Vol. 26, Issue 5, pp. 519–612), is an outcome of the “Mapping Eco-Social Assets” project at the University of Reading, UK. This project contributed to the development of the “Social Value Toolkit for Architecture”, which was published by the *Royal Institute of British Architects* in 2020.

between everyday factors of wellbeing and the urban environment— a connection that has been reflected in urban design literature (and practice—refer footnote 3) since the latter half of the 20th century to the present.

Table 2. Five-a-day action strategy for improved wellbeing (Foresight, 2008).

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Example Behavior</i>
<i>Keep Active</i>	Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden.
<i>Connect</i>	Connect with people around, family, friends, neighbours, etc.
<i>Take Notice</i>	Be curious. Appreciate the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Savour the moment. Be present.
<i>Give</i>	Do something nice for a friend or stranger. Thank someone. Smile, Volunteer, and join a community group.
<i>Keep Learning</i>	Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for that course. Fix something.

Thus, research on wellbeing confirms that it is an everyday construct requiring an individual’s active and mindful participation. The built environment plays a pivotal role in either supporting or inhibiting this process. Through spatial narratives, films can encapsulate this interplay as “observed knowledge,” “semantic knowledge,” and “cinematic intelligence” related to wellbeing in varying degrees.

4. Methodology

A tradition of cinema rooted in impressions of the French New Wave with rather odd similarities in the socio-economic and political background given mainstream disparities as global north and global south contexts is “Sinhalese cinema” in Sri Lanka.

“(Sinhalese Cinema) took an overtly political character [...] Its backdrop was the consolidation of post-colonial *nationalism* from the mid-fifties onwards, with a strong emphasis on cultural protectionism. In the nationalist intellectual construction of “Indigenous culture”, the argument concerning cinema was [...] invented by the intelligentsia of the radical left in the mid-sixties. [...] to denote a range of possibilities of a well-designed “counter-revolutionary” cultural project.” (Uyangoda, 1989: p. 38)

The possibilities explored in relation to the “counter-revolutionary” cultural project are assimilated into the *yatharthaya* (realism), a genre that rejects the qualities of *bolanda* (silly, unrealistic, melodramatic, and low-quality) and *vanija* (commercial or money-making) films. Instead, it embraces the realistic literary tradition, such as that of the French New Wave cinema, as a reflection of social realism. “Many literary critics in Sri Lanka argue that “true art” should reflect life as it is” (Uyangoda, 1989: p. 41), a stance that aligns with the push for representing the “everyday” in film. This sentiment is echoed by veteran Sri Lankan film director Dr. Dharmasena Pathiraja, known as a “rebel with a cause” and the “enfant terri-

ble” of the 1970s. His focus on realism is evident in his exploration of the social constructs behind the formation of post-colonial Colombo:

“What *intrigued* me, and something that continues to haunt my films is the idea of people from the outskirts pouring into the city. In our country, particularly at that time the 60s and 70s, Colombo was beginning to form and develop an identity. This identity was given shape by those who were moving in from outside... The overall story is the romantic yearning of the youth to belong within the cityscape.” (Dharmasena Pathiraja in [Amaruwan, 2019](#))

Pathiraja’s work portrays the social realities of his era, delving into themes such as unemployment and the economic and class-based struggles faced by youth. Influenced by activists like Jean-Luc Godard, third cinema filmmakers such as Fernando Solanas, and Asian directors like Satyajit Ray, Pathiraja represents a new generation of Sinhalese literati. His filmmaking has inspired a wave of subsequent realist films, where the city of Colombo serves as a critical focal point—a microcosm reflecting a multitude of nuanced socio-cultural and political issues.

This paper proposes the Sinhala language film *Motor Bicycle* (2016), written and directed by [Naotunna \(2016\)](#), as a realist film to explore the convergence of cinema, the everyday, and wellbeing. The proposed method involves two key steps. First, the film’s psychogeography will be traversed by analyzing the emotions of the protagonist in relation to the “ten determinants” of flourishing. Second, the urban spaces depicted in the film will be mapped to assess their conduciveness to wellbeing, specifically focusing on the habits of “Keep Active,” “Take Notice,” and “Connect,” which are directly tied to the built environment. Additionally, the habits of “Give” and “Keep Learning” will be examined through the characters’ emotions and actions—for example, the act of smiling representing “Give.”

James Corner notes that “mapping is a fantastic cultural project, creating and building the world as much as describing it. [...] Mapping acts may emancipate potentials, enrich experiences, and diversify worlds” ([Corner, 2011](#)). The mapping exercise aims to fulfill this purpose.

The resulting knowledge—termed “cinematic intelligence”—is expected to validate the method of film analysis as a tool to understand the state of wellbeing in cities. As a pilot study analyzing a single representative film, this research is intended to serve as a foundation for future studies.

5. Colombo on a Motorcycle: Cinematic Intelligence for Wellbeing

The film *Motorbicycle* (2016) portrays the life of Rangana, a working-class youth and aspiring musician from a slum community (*watta*) in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Rangana dreams of becoming a successful musician one day, and this dream serves as his motivation to resist the negative effects of his current state of relative poverty. His mother runs a small business to support their livelihood, while

Rangana performs gigs at nightclubs with his band, which consists of his close friends. Together, they struggle to bring their shared dreams to reality. Rangana is convinced that owning a motorcycle will somehow bring him closer to achieving his aspirations—both as a musician and as a prospective husband to his girlfriend. He is also convinced that a motorcycle would help him escape the discomfort and inconvenience of Colombo’s congested and outdated public transport system. To fulfill this desire, Rangana purchases a second-hand motorcycle from a black-market dealer, using funds obtained by pawning his mother’s gold jewelry with her permission.

After purchasing the motorcycle, an elated Rangana arranges to meet his girlfriend in the city. She is a student living in a two-story flat with her parents, a typical middle-class household. Their relationship, however, is disapproved of by her parents. The film then follows their day in the city as they travel together on the motorcycle. Through this day, the film illustrates how the realities of the *everyday*, manifested through the built context of the city, cause their two worlds to collide.

5.1. From Semantic Knowledge to Cinematic Intelligence

Table 3 (below) captures Rangana’s state of Wellbeing at the start of the film evaluated through the ten determinants of “Flourishing”, by “observing the observer”. (*Semantic knowledge to Cinematic Intelligence*). According to Huppert & So (2013)’s definition (refer section 3), Rangana is not “flourishing”. However, he has a moderately high level of wellbeing.

Table 3. Evaluation of the ten determinants of “flourishing” at the start of the film (Source: Author).

Positive Feature	Objective evaluation of Rangana’s subjective wellbeing	
<i>Hedonic viewpoint—positive characteristics</i>		
Optimism	✓	Rangana is very optimistic about his future (though not realistic)
Self-esteem	✓	He thinks highly of his talent in music
Vitality	✓	He is energetic
Resilience	✓	He goes on with his life, despite negative circumstances
Emotional stability	×	His emotions quickly shift based on different encounters
Positive Emotion*	×	He is not happy about his present life
<i>Eudemonic viewpoint—positive functioning</i>		
Engagement	✓	He is positively engaged with his music
Competence	×	He does not feel accomplished.
Meaning	×	He does not see meaning in his present life.
Positive relationships	✓	He knows his mother loves him and his friends care for him. He also has a girlfriend

Rangana's state of wellbeing undergoes significant change as the film progresses. As the couple traverses the city of Colombo, a series of events unfold that force them to confront their differences. The day spent in the city leads them to realize that their relationship cannot be defined within the socio-economic constructs of the city. Unable to bridge the gap created by class-based differences, they agree to part ways. **Table 4** (below) summarizes Rangana's state of wellbeing at the end of the narration. He finds himself in a state of "languishing." While he still exhibits some positive traits, such as resilience, engagement, and positive relationships, these are notably diminished.

Table 4. Rangana's state of wellbeing at the end of the film (Source: Author).

Positive Feature	Objective evaluation of Rangana's subjective wellbeing
<i>Hedonic viewpoint—positive characteristics</i>	
Optimism	× Separated from his girlfriend and his motorcycle, Rangana does not look forward to his future
Self-esteem	× Low self-esteem resulting from his recent losses
Vitality	× Low energy as he tries to confront his losses
Resilience	✓ He goes on with his life, despite negative circumstances
Emotional stability	× Feeling sad and bereft
Positive Emotion*	× Rangana is more unhappy than before
<i>Eudemonic viewpoint—positive functioning</i>	
Engagement	✓ He is positively engaged with his music
Competence	× He does not feel accomplished
Meaning	× He does not see meaning in his present life
Positive relationships	✓ He shares a meaningful bond with his mother, has friends, however, he has lost his girlfriend

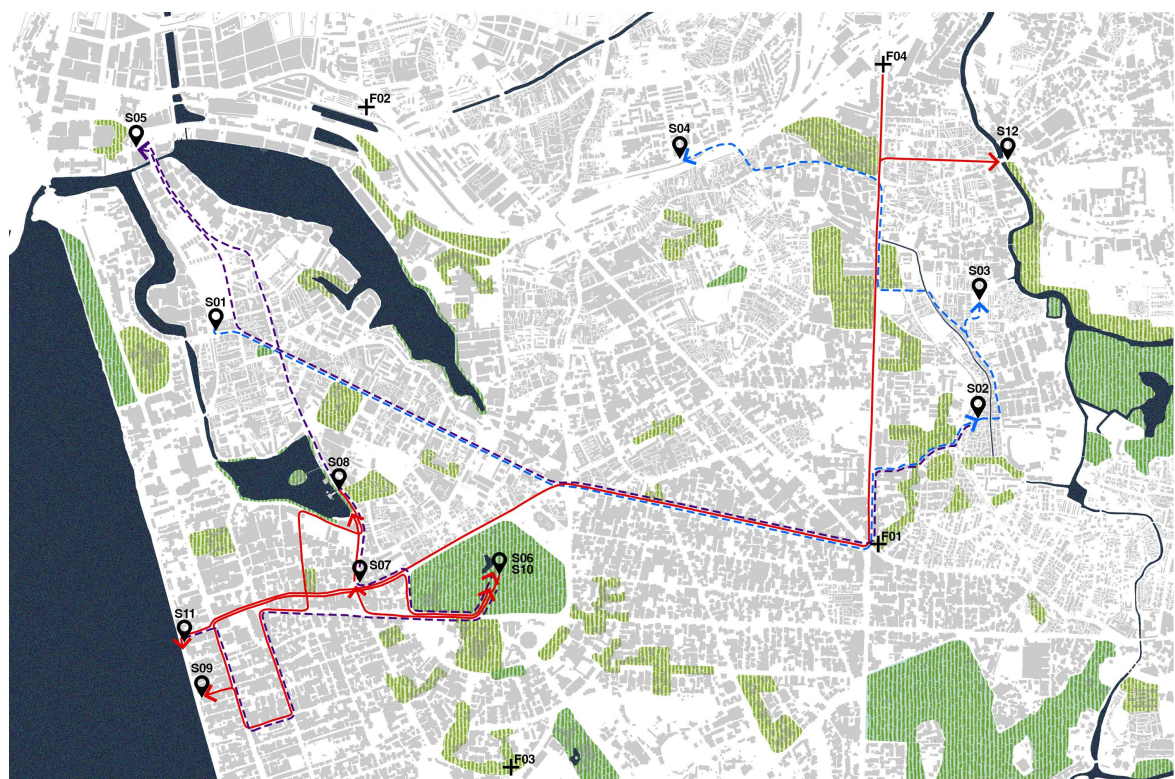
The analysis of *semantic knowledge* (i.e., the viewer's perception of the observed scenes as intended by the director) reveals that the film engages with and addresses aspects of wellbeing. This opens the potential to explore the conduciveness of the city's environment to wellbeing (defined as "well-being conduciveness" in 2. Cinema, wellbeing, and the city). The second part of the analysis will relate specific filmed scenes to the "five-a-day" formula for wellbeing, further examining the spatial dimensions of the film. It explores the "Real" city through the "Reel" city in terms of wellbeing conduciveness.

5.2. From Objective Knowledge to Cinematic Intelligence

This component of the analysis directly observes the actors' bodies as they engage in wellbeing activities rather than focusing on the voyageur's emotional response to a scene. Thus, it derives "Cinematic Intelligence" from Objective Knowledge (World 1 to World 3). The places depicted in the film are identified and assigned

a score for “wellbeing conduciveness” based on their facilitation of wellbeing activities. The couple’s route through the city is mapped to validate the observed locations. **Map 1** illustrates the identified locations across 12 filmed scenes. Mapping the route is a crucial part of the study, as some locations were substituted for ease of shooting. This process also aids in identifying the intended locations. The legend marks substituted locations with a star.

On their journey through the city, the couple first visits the park (**Map 1—S06**), a space frequented by couples like them who cannot afford the privacy of a restaurant. However, they soon encounter a guard tasked with calling out “misbehaving” couples. Using a megaphone, he publicly reprimands those who get too physically close (**Figure 1**).



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Built area Tree canopies/ parks with public access Tree canopies/ parks without public access Water bodies Journey before purchasing the motorcycle Journey on motorcycle before the decline of wellbeing Journey during the negative trajectory of wellbeing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> S01 - Castle Hotel, Slave Island (Colombo 02) S02 - Rangana's House in Wanathamulla, Borella (Colombo 08) S03 - Sahaspura social housing building (Colombo 08) S04 - Drieberg's Avenue, Panchikawatta (Colombo 10) S05 - Regal Cinema (Colombo 02) S06 - Viharamahadevi park (Colombo 07) S07 - High-end Clothing Shop in Gangarama (Colombo 02)* S08 - Gangarama Seema Malaka (Colombo 02)* S09 - Short-stay Hotel Room in Kollupitiya (Colombo 03) S10 - Viharamahadevi park (Colombo 07) S11 - Sea Front in Kollupitiya, Marine drive (Colombo 03) S12 - Kolonnawa Road Bridge, Dematagoda (Colombo 09)* |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> F01 - Borella Bus Station (Colombo 08) F02 - Pettah Bus Station (Colombo 01) F03 - Race Course Ground (Colombo 07) F04 - Baseline Road Flyover, Dematagoda (Colombo 09) |
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Map 1. The couple’s route through the city. Also indicated are built areas, tree canopies and access levels, and water bodies (Prepared by Lakal Piyaathna, Architect).

The park depicted in the film is Viharamahadevi Park, the largest and most significant public park in central Colombo. The scenario portrayed is not fictional but a common spectacle, which the film critiques with cynicism. While this park and other public spaces, such as Independence Square and its gardens, are widely used by the upper middle class for exercise and recreation, the film highlights how they remain unwelcoming to people of Rangana's social standing.



Figure 1. At Viharamahadevi Park, a guard uses a megaphone to call out couples who get physically too close to one another (Scenes from the film *Motorbicycle*, 2016).

Ideally, a park should support all five wellbeing prompts, particularly the three most connected to the built environment—“Keep Active,” “Take Notice,” and “Connect.” However, the film illustrates that Colombo’s main park is heavily underutilized as a wellbeing-conducive social asset. Notably, with user behavior under surveillance, the park lacks “flexibility and freedom” (Hatleskog & Samuel, 2021). As it serves different social classes unequally, it raises critical questions regarding “Fit,” “Access,” and “Control” (Lynch, 1984).

As the narrative unfolds, a nightclub where Rangana performs with his band (**Map 1**—S01) is introduced. This setting is identified as the Castle Hotel, a colonial-era building over 200 years old that had long served as a pub catering to the working-class community of Slave Island⁴. In May 2017, this historic but dilapidated hotel—once a symbol of the district’s affluent past—was demolished during a wave of rapid gentrification, resulting in the loss of a significant part of Slave Island’s distinctive urban history.

As shown in **Figure 2**, the film captures and commemorates this historic building. The filmed scenes highlight activities aligned with wellbeing prompts such as “Connect,” “Take Notice,” and “Give.” Additionally, as Rangana progresses in his musical career, the Castle Hotel fosters “Keep Learning,” while dancing in the nightclub corresponds to “Keep Active.”

⁴The name Slave Island reflects Colombo’s colonial past. During Dutch rule, Kafir slaves brought to Sri Lanka were housed—effectively imprisoned—in the area, which was an urban island surrounded by Lake Beira. Under British rule, Slave Island became industrialized, with the establishment of companies, colonial bungalows, and expanded land areas, transforming it into a bustling metropolis. In the post-independence era, migrants from the outskirts settled in Slave Island, shaping it into a vibrant, multicultural urban district. In recent post-war years, the area was labeled a blighted neighborhood occupying high-value land in central Colombo. Through state-led gentrification, forced evictions and the demolition of run-down tenements cleared the way for sleek and luxurious skyscrapers to rise in their place, transforming Slave Island in a matter of a few years.



Figure 2. Rangana performs at the Castle Hotel premises in Slave Island—a community establishment lost to gentrification (Scenes from the film, *Motorbicycle*, 2016).

As community members sing, dance, and enjoy themselves together, the Castle Hotel is portrayed as a space offering “flexibility and freedom” while fostering “positive emotions” (Hatleskog & Samuel, 2021). The scenes also emphasize key urban factors such as “Vitality”—fostering cultural engagement and community interactions; “Sense”—as the hotel’s historic architecture contributes to imageability and a strong sense of place; “Fit”—as a well-functioning and meaningful space for socializing and relaxation; “Access”—as an inclusive space in central Colombo with an informal atmosphere; and “Control”—as the community freely appropriates the setting and expresses itself through dance and song (Lynch, 1984), underscoring the Castle Hotel’s role as a high-value social asset in its time.

Highlighting another spot in the city, the couple relaxes on the motorcycle near a waterfront park. Based on their route, the location is identified as the “Seema-Malaka” area near Lake Beira, a landscaped recreational venue near a Buddhist temple in Colombo (Map 1—S08). While a wedding photoshoot takes place, Rangana and his girlfriend playfully watch the scene, commenting on the couple’s attire and wondering about their story. Prompted by the scene, the two discuss their dreams for the future. As the entourage requests to borrow Rangana’s motorcycle for the photo-shoot, Rangana is noticeably happy and validated.

This scene reveals that the location strongly facilitates the prompts of “Connect” and “Take Notice.” As they smile, watch, and engage with the photoshoot, the proxy of “Give” is also fulfilled. Overall, the scene depicts “flexibility and freedom” and “positive emotions” (Hatleskog & Samuel, 2021). The film also captures the “Seema Malaka” as a public place reflecting factors such as “Fit”—functioning well as a short-term recreational setting; “Access”—positioned centrally near the lake, inclusive and easily accessible; “Control”—fostering freedom and flexibility; and “Sense”—with its historical and cultural significance as a place with a scenic view near a Buddhist temple (Lynch, 1984). However, the space is transient, designed for short-term enjoyment.

At one point, the film breaks into a song. Using poetic license to slightly deviate from reality, the couple dances, wearing vibrant props in selected backdrops around the city. The song follows a carnival theme (Figure 3). The backdrops include a bus stand, identified as the main city bus stand in Pettah (Map 1—F02), certain streets, and colonial buildings (Map 1—F03). The Cargills-Millers build-

ing and its famous arcade in Colombo Fort are depicted, along with the newly revamped Colombo Racecourse Grandstand.

As the film seeks to depict the couple's hopes and dreams for a bright future together, it also reveals the potential for vibrancy in these urban spaces. The film compels the viewer, who may be watching with the intent of understanding well-being in the city, to recognize that the main bus stand could support the wellbeing prompts: "Keep Active," "Connect," and "Take Notice." As the couple and other dancers smile and express their happiness and vitality, "Give" is also reflected.



Figure 3. The couple dance to a vibrant song about dreams, symbolizing their optimism for the future and vitality as they remain hopeful (*Motorbicycle*, 2016).

The film wistfully guides the viewer through Colombo's historical buildings, offering insights into the significance of the visual composition of urban forms for subjective wellbeing. It highlights the positive effects of a diverse, layered visual experience, as endorsed by Rowe & Koetter (1984), first by commemorating the Castle Hotel for what it was and then using poetic license to illustrate an alternate reality of what the historical forms of the Cargills-Millers building and the Colombo Racecourse could potentially contribute to the city.

As their day in the city continues to unfold, the narrative gradually shifts to convey the collision of their two worlds. The couple moves from place to place, facilitated by the motorcycle, offering the viewer sights of various everyday urban settings. A downward trajectory of wellbeing is conveyed through each encounter. They must leave a film hall (the "Regal" cinema, a place of urban culture in Colombo, **Map 1**—S05) as the girl sees one of her relatives there and fears being caught by her disapproving parents. They leave the park, discouraged by the guard. A police officer stops them, and Rangana offers a measly bribe—a bunch of rambutans!—to overlook his inability to produce an insurance document for his motorcycle.

When it starts to rain, the couple takes shelter in a high-end clothing store (**Map 1**—S07) in a modern building. The girl tries on various outfits and playfully models them for her boyfriend.

The rain is a distraction in the downward trajectory of the narrative, providing a reprieve from their class differences. It allows them to enjoy the moment. Once the rain stops, they face more situations that starkly emphasize their class divide. Eventually, the couple finds themselves sitting on the rocky shores of Colombo's coastline (**Figure 4**), both symbolically and physically marginalized at the city's

edge (**Map 1**—S11). Sitting under the shade of an umbrella, with the wind blowing in their faces and trains rumbling past behind them, the couple confronts their uncertain future.



Figure 4. The couple sit on the rocky shores of Colombo’s coastline, at the very edge of the city, and confront their differences. Plausible location: Colpetty shore (Colombo 03) (*Motorbicycle*, 2016).

After separating from his girlfriend, a forlorn and languishing Rangana wanders around the city’s periphery. He pauses on the Kollonawa Bridge (**Map 1**—S12) and cries, discarding tokens of his broken relationship. The bike is then reclaimed by its rightful owner, who identifies it as his stolen property. A bereft Rangana accepts a ride home from a neighbor in the *Watta*, a man previously revealed as a hitman for a drug cartel—someone Rangana had always been careful to avoid.

During the ride home, a pursuer’s misidentified target in a discreet shooting results in Rangana—still lost in a sad trance—being shot. In this way, the film becomes a metaphor for the tragedy of working-class youth in Colombo City, exposing the covert world of crime lurking within urban life. Rangana is introduced as an innocent young man who aspires to lead a morally upright life by doing good things, such as performing his music. Within the tight-knit social fabric of the *Watta*, he is careful to cultivate only positive relationships and avoids engaging in crime and dishonesty. The film illustrates how the city fails to provide fertile ground to nurture the dreams and aspirations of youth like Rangana; instead, it fosters hostility and pulls its youth into its meaner undercurrents. Essentially, Rangana’s life ends before it could ever begin, as he is consistently marginalized through systemically repressive socio-economic constructs, with the city’s physical environment acting as a vessel for this marginalization.

Table 5 provides a summary of observations evaluated using a 5-point rating system. A score of 5 indicates that a specific wellbeing prompt, such as “Keep Active,” is highly evident. Scores ranging from 0 to 1 indicate that the activity is either not observed or that the location has the potential to support the prompt but is currently not fulfilling this potential. A neutral score of 3 signifies that the prompt is somewhat observed or that the location provides selective support for wellbeing activities only for certain social groups or classes.

The author assigned values based on the interpretation of the film as discussed above (based on “observed knowledge,” “semantic knowledge,” and “cinematic intelligence”). These values were mapped to create a visual representation that

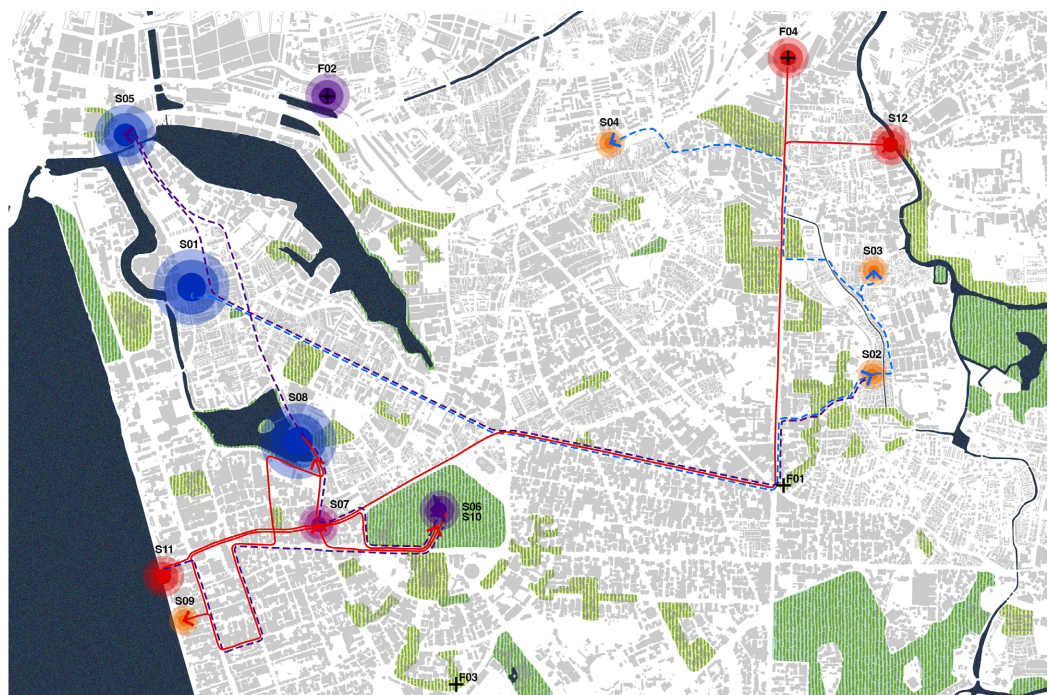
enhances understanding of the city’s wellbeing.

Map 2 reveals that the Castle Hotel, a space for the working class to unwind, and the Gangarama Seema-Malaka area, a location for enjoying the surroundings, demonstrate a high level of wellbeing conduciveness (green). The shopping mall,

Table 5. Suggested wellbeing rating for observed urban spaces (Source: Author).

	<i>Keep Active</i>	<i>Take Notice</i>	<i>Connect</i>	<i>Give</i>	<i>Keep Learning</i>	<i>Urban features</i>	<i>Total</i>
The Park	3	4	2	2	1	2	14
Castle Hotel	3	5	5	4	3	4	24
Seema-Malaka	2	5	4	4	3	4	22
Bus Stand	2	5	4	3	2	2	18
Shopping mall	1	3	3	2	1	2	12
Regal Cinema	2	4	4	3	4	3	20

Key: 1 = Not observed/May have potential; 2 = Somewhat observed; 3 = Somewhat observable/Limited to a certain group or class; 4 = Observed; 5 = Observed at a high level.



- Wellbeing conducive
- Under-utilised wellbeing assets
- Circumstantially conducive to wellbeing
- Not wellbeing conducive
- Neutral

Map 2. Map of wellbeing conduciveness of identified locations (Prepared by Lakal Piyarathna, Architect).

where the couple seeks refuge from the rain (depicted in purple), indicates that wellbeing conduciveness is selective based on social class. Urban locations such as Viharamahadevi Park and the Pettah Bus Stand (yellow) are recognized as having significant potential for promoting wellbeing but remain underutilized. The red icon represents the edge of the city, symbolic of marginalization.

6. Discussion

6.1. Colombo: The City in Cinema

Colombo is the commercial capital of Sri Lanka and a Global South city. It was shaped by three successive colonial powers: the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. When the empire left Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in relative destitution, the post-independence journey toward democratization, development, and rediscovery of collective heritage after 450 years of colonization became a struggle. Nuanced aspects of this struggle eventually led to an ethnic conflict that lasted 30 years. The atmosphere of terror caused by the armed conflict pushed the country into a downward economic trajectory. During this period, the city's urban environment deteriorated rapidly. An air of distrust and fear loomed over the cityscape, and the war effort neglected urban development. Public spaces, such as parks, were fenced off for safety reasons. The city became divided into fashionable urban quarters and impoverished residential districts. Central Colombo primarily emerged as an affluent neighborhood and business district, while downtown areas degenerated into urban shantytowns.

The film *Motorbicycle* (2016) portrays the cityscape with all its complexities, capturing the physical environment and social dynamics of low-income settlements in stark contrast to more affluent urban areas. It also reveals that, although the fences have come down, public spaces remain inhospitable to the underclasses. The film illustrates how the city continues to maintain exclusivity in subtle but pervasive ways.

The film is set in the new post-war period of Colombo, a time marked by the return of peace and security to Sri Lanka. However, whether the "peace dividend" in terms of economic prosperity is equitably distributed remains an open question. Urban development was placed under the national defense portfolio of the central government for post-war reconstruction (Munasinghe, 2012), a decision celebrated by proponents of top-down mechanisms yet strongly opposed by activists from various interest groups as the process involved the forced eviction and rehousing of low-income settlers into austere high-rise apartment buildings, whose built forms raise concerns regarding minimum standards of habitability leaving aside broader aspects of wellbeing. Large-scale mixed-use projects were implemented on the cleared lands, including high-end shopping malls. While they are open to people of all social classes, as the film depicts, these malls serve as temporary distractions, with low-income and often even middle-class groups being priced out of meaningful consumption. Under the Colombo city "beautification" project, several neglected colonial-era buildings, which had fallen into dis-

repair during the war years, were renovated and converted into high-end shopping precincts. These included: 1) The Colombo racecourse grandstand; 2) The asylum for the mentally handicapped; 3) The Dutch hospital in Colombo Fort. Meanwhile, established haunts of the working class, such as the Castle Hotel depicted in the film, were torn down. While the rehabilitation of historical landmarks is commendable from a visual-artistic perspective of urban design and planning, the film reveals concerns regarding accessibility and inclusion, issues now embedded within the historical building layer of the city.

[Radicati \(2017\)](#) argues that global cities are shaped through various forms of dispossession and aspiration, and in the case of Colombo, this process reflects the aspirations of the urban elite alongside the dispossession of the working class. While income levels in Sri Lanka rose in the short term from 2010 to 2018 after the war, the gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” widened ([Ratnayake, 2013](#)). The share of household income held by the poorest income group is 2%, while the richest hold 38% ([Nanayakkara, 2016](#)). The income inequality in Colombo is even starker than the national average, with the wealthiest group in the city controlling 72.9% of the district’s total household income ([Nanayakkara, 2018](#)).

Colombo emerged as the fastest-developing city in South Asia and the fastest-growing city for international visitors globally between 2016 and 2018. During this period, Sri Lanka recorded the highest per-capita GDP and the lowest level of urban poverty in South Asia. Although the 2019 Easter Bombings and the COVID-19 pandemic had ripple effects on the economy, these events cannot fully explain the devastating economic crisis of 2022, when Sri Lanka declared bankruptcy. The rupee crashed by nearly 80% against the US dollar overnight, and the country plunged into a state of economic and political instability ([Sri Lanka: State of the Economy, 2023](#)). The film uncovers the ground-level conditions hidden behind statistics and development propaganda, offering an authentic portrayal of everyday life in the city that helps explain the economic unraveling of 2022.

[Mahali et al. \(2018\)](#) have identified four networks of relations that investigations of wellbeing in the Global South should consider: the relationships between a) individual and collective, b) people and the state, c) people and the environment, and d) people and power. Particularly highlighted is the need to engage with the politics of power when discerning wellbeing. Film analysis captures these nuanced aspects, which are notoriously difficult to dissect through traditional research methods. For example, film analysis provides a lens into the complex living patterns of shanty communities.

Relating the findings of [Mahali et al. \(2018\)](#) to the film’s context:

- a) Individual and collective: Rangana and the people in the *watta*;
- b) People and the state: Rangana and the police officer, and the guard in the park;
- c) People and the environment: Rangana’s exclusion from the park;
- d) People and power: Rangana’s experience of gang-wars and shoot-outs, which he is initially at the periphery of but ultimately claims his life.

This underscores urban power structures as a critical determinant of wellbeing in the Global South. As an ideal-typical case study, this research provides valuable insights to guide future investigations in other cities facing comparable urban challenges.

6.2. Limitations as a Double-Edged Sword

Films inherently carry the biases of their directors or narrators. As argued in this paper, the proposed method of the twice-removed reading of “semantic knowledge,” where the observer is observed (refer to 3. Cinematic Urban Observations of Wellbeing), helps decode the objective reality represented beneath that bias. Additionally, the genre of the film and an initial analysis of the degree of *cityness* present in the film (refer to 4. Methodology) can help shortlist suitable films for wellbeing analysis.

While the interpretively assigned objective values for wellbeing conduciveness in **Table 5** and **Map 2** suffice as a pilot study, further analysis is possible. For example, the methodological approach used by Vikas Mehta in *Evaluating Public Space* (Mehta, 2014) offers an excellent framework to increase the objective confirmation of exploratory and inductive knowledge. In this study, aspects of public space are evaluated through variable indicators. For instance, “inclusiveness” is assessed through the “presence of people of diverse ages” and the “range of activities and behaviors,” among other factors. This is a developed empirical version of the approach taken in this paper in evaluating wellbeing prompts, such as “Keep Active,” by observing variables like “walking” or “dancing” in the embodied performance of the actors to extract “objective knowledge” regarding wellbeing from the film. Supplementing the film analysis method with firsthand studies is recommended to validate the findings further.

However, it is worth noting that a common challenge in most empirical urban studies is high resource-intensiveness. Additionally, such studies face ethical and practical limitations. For example, public aversion to being photographed and the tendency for people to modify their behavior when aware of being observed or recorded can compromise the accuracy of results. Film analysis offers a solution to such limitations, providing an alternative means of understanding wellbeing in cities as cinema inhabits urban culture. Thus, the method presents challenges as well as opportunities within its limitations.

7. Conclusion

The concept of “Everyday” is central to understanding wellbeing. Cinema, through its artistic devices, captures the profoundness of the “Everyday” and serves as a valuable medium for exploring wellbeing. By navigating the psychogeography of film and uncovering its spatial dimensions, the “wellbeing conduciveness” of urban environments can be analyzed and mapped. As demonstrated in the analysis of the representative film, examining a protagonist’s positive and negative experiences of the “Everyday” within an urban context reveals how objective and se-

mantic knowledge can be derived from filmed scenes to generate a form of “cinematic intelligence” for understanding wellbeing.

This positions cinema as a promising tool for architects and urban designers to evaluate wellbeing in cities. Insights extracted from the “Reel” city, based on the proposed criteria, can inform the design and development of the “Real” city. The visual clarity of cinematic mapping can play a critical role in addressing urban wellbeing by identifying issues such as apathetic developments, underutilized spaces, and patterns of access, exclusion, and marginalization. Furthermore, the analysis of urban power structures highlights cinema as a compelling database for dissecting wellbeing, particularly in convoluted urban contexts like those in the Global South.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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