

ZOOMING OUT



Satyajit Ray, *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room). 1958. The ageing zamindar, Biswambhar Roy, turns his gaze on Moti, the elephant grazing in the distance. IMAGE COURTESY: ANDREW ROBINSON'S SATYAJIT RAY – THE INNER EYE. PUBLISHED IN INDIA BY OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW DELHI, 2004.



Andrey Tarkovsky, *Ivan's Childhood*. Memories of peacetime: a cartload of apples, and horses, wet with rain, gleaming in the sun.

Shiladitya Sarkar looks at how some film-makers have framed the landscape.

THE CAMERA MOVES STEALTHILY LIKE CÉZANNE'S BRUSH. LIGHT and shade intertwine subtly as in a Turner. The elusive play of shadows is brought into focus as if it were a Pollock painting in progress.

Camerawork often brings to mind the art of painters, especially in the films of Tarkovsky, Kurosawa, Paradzanov, Herzog, and Mizoguchi. Tarkovsky's films abound with references to painters and paintings; Ray's subtle filmic compositions, Kurosawa's geometric delineation of space, Antonioni's vistas, Ozu's interiority, owe in many ways to painters and paintings. Shifting perspectives, effects of movement, plastic properties of light, densities of tone, among other features, are common in both the art forms. The landscape is as important in art as it is in cinema; nature has always been a potent source of inspiration for artists, irrespective of the medium.

However, there is no genre called Cinema of the landscape. Painting, on the other hand, responding to the nauseated fixedness of classicism, used the landscape as a mode to disrupt conventional ways of viewing reality; it helped raise doubts about the unsullied depiction of nature, broke the sureness of perspective, and thereby disturbed the security of the viewer. Under deft hands, the genre became less mimetic and more contemplative.

Images in films have remained predominantly in the service of the narrative. This has been especially true of mainstream films (in Westerns and in Bollywood films), where the landscape has functioned mainly as a setting for rugged heroes and gyrating heroines. The tyranny of the narrative has robbed cinema of certain aesthetic possibilities. Thanks to the works and ideas of Eisenstein and Vertov from the USSR, some French Nouvelle Vague-ists, some Italian neo-realists, and some avant-garde directors (Anger of USA, Angelopoulos of Greece, Kurosawa and Mizoguchi of Japan, Ghatak of India, primarily), a much-needed dimension has been restored to films. In the works of these masters, we



Andrey Tarkovsky, *Nostalgia*.



Andrey Tarkovsky, *Nostalgia*. Final Shot: the Russian house inside the Italian Cathedral.

find the landscape (both urban and rural) becoming a potent space for meditation and introspection. The ways of perceiving, probing, and projecting the landscape have intensified as wars, famines, and possible threats of nuclear war have clouded our minds – nature no longer seems fit for idle contemplation. With man's growing capacity to annihilate the world, the very environment that has sustained him has come under threat and has inspired a search away from classical perceptions about the greater genius of nature.

Eisenstein's landscapes were objective correlatives of the anxieties that human figures located within them suffered from. One remembers the concern of Herzog – probably the most landscape-centric film director – to find “a landscape with almost human qualities.” Herzog's art drew landscapes closer to the inner life of human beings – he pushed the limits, stating that he “directed” landscapes as he did animals and people.

There are no definite opinions on how filmmakers should use landscape and to what extent. Wajda's *Landscape after Battle* and Angelopoulos' *Landscape in the Mist* are both centred on the human struggle for identity and solidarity. While Wajda's narrative is set in the cold war era in Poland, focusing on the dehumanizing dynamics among prisoners freed from a concentration camp, Angelopoulos follows two children's misguided and unattainable quest to find their father. Tarkovsky's deft use of landscape to summon up a spiritual otherworldliness in *Stalker* is far removed from Ray's oblique handling of nature in *Kanchenjunga*. Antonioni's filming of the ordinary in extraordinary ways comes alive in *Zabriskie Point*, where the heroine fantasizes about blowing up her lover's luxury house, with images of objects symbolising our materialistic world, being blown over the desert.



Andrey Tarkovsky. *The Sacrifice.* The long fire scene conveys the distorted time sense of Alexander's new life. All Tarkovsky images courtesy: Andrey Tarkovsky's *Scripting in Time – Reflections on the Cinema*. Translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair. Published by Faber and Faber, London, 1989.



Ritwik Ghatak. *A River called Titash.* Ghatak addresses the trauma of Partition in this film. 1973. Image courtesy: Ritwik Ghatak. Cinema and I, 1987. Published by Ritwik Memorial Trust with support from Federation of Film Societies of India.

Unlike Kurosawa, Mizoguchi always left space for his characters to experience a symbiotic relationship with the landscape; some of his film titles, *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums* and *Tales of the Pale and Silvery Moon after the Rain* evoke the expressionistic drama of nature. Recently Barua's *Hkbagoroloi Bobu Door (It's a Long Way to the Sea)*, involving a boatman whose livelihood comes under threat with news of a bridge over the river, re-problematised the symbiotic relationship between man and nature.

Let's take a look at Tarkovsky and Ghatak. Tarkovsky's films are laden with visual imagery featuring the interaction between primal elements:

he uses them to underscore his thematic concerns about eroding spirituality and alienation of man from nature (nature is both a comforting and forbidding presence). The natural world intrudes and leaves its marks not just on the psyche, but on everything it touches: snow floating through the roof of a sacked cathedral (*Andrei Rublev*), rain falling inside the hero's family home in *Solaris*, the swamp through which Ivan has to walk (*Ivan's Childhood*) come readily to mind. Animals, especially horses and dogs, also appear in certain enigmatic moments (*Ivan's Childhood* and *Andrei Rublev*). Water acquires an almost ritualistic dimension (Kurosawa had once noted that no other filmmaker had filmed water as intensely as Tarkovsky). His last film, *Sacrifice*, is a poignant story of a man willing to let go of all his worldly possessions if it would help his family evade the horrors of a nuclear war. Tarkovsky's use of colour (often muted, with washed hues suffused with gray tones), sharp and contrasting scenes of light and darkness, long tracking shots, apt zooming, and subtle juxtapositions, always highlight the entrapment of man in relation to his environment.

The landscape always acquires a political charge in Ghatak's films as compared to Tarkovsky's 'spiritual' charge. In *Komal Gandbar*, Vrigu laments standing in front of a railway track, which once connected East Bengal to West Bengal: "That is my country... how near it is. I can never reach there though".

The experience of being uprooted from the idyllic rural milieu of East Bengal and the cultural trauma of the Partition of 1947 is what Ghatak explores in many of his films. His characters live out this experience and also struggle to come to terms with an alien urban landscape. It is evident in the heart-rending cry in *Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-clapped Star)*, where Neeta utters, "Dada, I want to live...", and her cry reverberates against the surrounding mountains. Sometimes, the primordial is set up in contrast to the modern, like in *Ajantrik*, a film about a man in a small town in Bihar and his old Chevrolet taxi. Poignant moments like children playing on an abandoned airstrip with a wrecked WWII airplane, being terrified by a *baburupree* in the form of Goddess Kali in *Subarnarekha (The Golden Line)*, or Neeta singing a song with her brother with the moonlight trickling through bamboo walls, are examples of the ways in which Ghatak presents settings that carry intimations about lonely battles and intimate tragedies.

In *A River Called Titash*, the river Titash is the lead character, sustaining a local community. The marvellous camerawork evokes the cycle of seasons (Monsoon has never been filmed so well in any Indian film ever) punctuated with fishing activities, tribal customs and rituals – all exemplifying the symbiotic relationship between man and nature. This bond between figure and landscape falls apart with the Titash drying up, leaving the villagers at the mercy of goons and landowners. In the last shot, a little boy, walks through a green expanse, whistling, suggesting that life moves on, albeit on a different plane.