

Chronicling City Through Cinema

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Tagore and His Poser on Cinema

At the outset I want to thank the Indian Institute of Advanced Study and Tagore Centre at IIAS for inviting me here to deliver a lecture—'Chronicling City Through Cinema'. It is a great honour for me to be addressing such a distinguished audience.

Tagore's relation to cinema is two-fold. Firstly, Tagore has the distinction of being among the elite group of writers in the world, whose literary works have been filmed into about 70 films. Some of these films have been made by leading filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Tapan Sinha and others. While this fact may be well known, what is not so well known is that Tagore had an affinity for cinema and had great expectations of this art when it was in its early years. Tagore had been exposed to world cinema during his travels to various countries. He could see that it had established itself as a medium of entertainment the world over with its well defined structure of production, distribution and exhibition. He had travelled to America, Latin America and Europe; had met with leading intellectuals, leaders and artists. USSR under Lenin and Lunacharsky had declared cinema to be the most important of all arts. In USSR, they even filmed Tagore's visits to various places. So he had a first-hand experience of cinema to an extent and was also exposed to highly experimental and purposeful work happening in European cinema. This must have resulted in his forming his own views about the medium, which was barely three decades old and he found it to be full of beauty and grandeur. We get a glimpse of his thoughts on cinema in the letter that he wrote to Tarun Kumar Bhaduri in 1929.

Tagore says—"The principal element of motion picture is flux of image. The beauty and grandeur of this force in motion has to be developed in such a way that it becomes self-supported without the use of words. If some other language is needed to explain its own, it amounts to

incompetence. If music can achieve profundity without the word; the cadence of a melody, then why should not this 'motive force' be considered as a distinct aesthetic experience?"

He ends the letter with a remark that so far this has not happened due to incompetent makers and the muddle headed public.

Tagore was not alone in welcoming cinema with visionary expectations. We can add Tolstoy and Gorky to the list. Tolstoy wrote in 1908 on his eightieth birthday that "this clickety contraption" [camera] was a direct assault on the writer's art. He says that a scene that takes pages to describe happens very fast on screen and is soon followed by another. Reacting to the challenge posed by the new narrative medium, he says that now we writers will have to devise a different way of writing to compete with this medium. Gorky writes—at about the same time as Tolstoy—of being "in the realm of shadows" and remarks that the experience is so close to life that the snowflakes falling on the screen seem to touch one's own cheeks.

Tolstoy welcomes cinema with the expectation that this new art-form will rival the already well established and evolved narrative form, like the novel. Gorky marvels at the life like quality of cinema. But, Tagore strikes a different note of expectation. Tagore's letter was written in 1929, while Tolstoy's observation was recorded in 1908, when cinema was still in its infancy. Cinema had achieved a lot in the two decades that followed, and Tagore had witnessed the growth. Genres like slapstick comedy and swashbuckling western films had made American cinema popular all over the world. Even small countries had made a definite beginning in setting up their own film industries. Avant garde filmmakers drawn from visual arts were exploring expressive possibilities of cinema beyond the mainstream dramatic narrative popularized by Hollywood and other national cinemas the world over. Hence, he makes it bold to put forth his demand on

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the medium and is in fact calling for 'a purity of form'. It is almost a plea to make cinema 'independent'.

However, cinema remains a composite art, synthesizing the elements of other major arts. To use the analogy of music given by Tagore, we can look at the argument afresh. If we look at sound and silence as the absolute material of the medium of music, the fact remains that music is seldom purely abstract. Indian as well as Western classical music contain non-musical i.e. literary or narrative references. Khayals and ragas are rendered in literary language. The five sections of Beethoven's Pastoral [6th symphony] are termed as: 1) Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the countryside; 2) Scene by the brook; 3) Merry gathering of country folk; 4) Thunder, Storm; 5) Shepherd's song; cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm. In Beethoven's own words this symphony is "more the expression of feeling than painting". Music is not a language in the sense that one can communicate [non-musical] thoughts, arguments and concepts through it [without the help of language]. Another way of putting it would be to say that all music communicates itself. But, cinema is often talked about as a language.

Absolute Cinema to City Symphonies

This begs the question - Is "purity of form" that crucial a concept in any art? And as a corollary to it—Does this concept contribute to the growth of an art form? This question was tackled by some European filmmakers in the 1920s in practice. In the context of Tagore's question it would be useful to follow their progress. Viking Eggeling from Sweden and Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann and Oskar Fischinger from Germany began a movement in cinema called "absolute film". With the exception of Fischinger the other three were painters. They rejected the reproduction of the natural world, plot-bound stories and characters and created on screen abstract narratives that depicted light, forms, textures and visual patterns. Ruttmann called his efforts—"painting in time". The term "absolute film" was first coined by Henri Chomette. The goal of the movement was to create a cinema that focused on the "pure" elements of film like motion, visual composition, and rhythm. They did make a few films depicting graphic abstraction in time, satisfying their need to overcome the limitation that painting as an art form has. Having successfully implemented their ideas on screen they wanted to extend the scope of their narratives. The emergence of documentary film also attracted their attention as it showed the possibility of doing a feature length film without employing literary and theatrical conventions like plot and characters. Their concerns were depicting things in motion, flow and time.

These filmmakers were all urban filmmakers living in industrialized European cities. City as a bee-hive of multiple activities offered a wide canvas to them. They portrayed the life of a city, mainly through visual impressions arranged as a passage of time. These films were nonfiction, were not about a set of characters, real or fictional, and generally without the narrative content of mainstream fiction films. They did not have to part ways with their original ideas as a play of rhythms, patterns, and tempi was possible in depicting city life. Thus city became the new dominant theme of experimental films and they came to be known as city symphony films.

Thus, what began as a process by a few painters to overcome the barrier of temporality that the art of painting presents, initially led them to the notion of an absolute film. But, soon they moved on from seeking abstraction on the screen to the concreteness of depicting city life.

Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* made in 1927 is a fine example of this genre. Ruttmann said this about the film: "Since I began in the cinema, I had the idea of making something out of life, of creating a symphonic film out of the millions of energies that comprise the life of a big city". It begins with the journey of an early morning train arriving into the city from outside. The journey proceeds through a very graphic intercutting of actions like movement of the rolling shutters and the moving train, as if to reach the heart of the city and then begins to explore the city as it exists ephemerally. This was a new style of filmmaking that rejected the rigid script or even a written script. It dealt with the ambient reality directly. Although the film was divided into five acts, these were composed in editing.

Joris Ivens [Netherlands] made a short film called *Rain* about the fluctuating city weather in Amsterdam, wherein a bright sunny day turns into a wet showery one and after the showers there is sunshine again illuminating a wet landscape. This film shot over four months capturing the various shades of rainfall was given a narrative structure of the passage of time over the editing table. The subject of the film is quite clearly Amsterdam city or its appearance to be more precise; before, during and after the rain.

Dziga Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* made in 1929 was again a chronicle of a city from dawn to dusk. The film's titles proclaim the following—

"The film *Man with a Movie Camera* represents

AN EXPERIMENTATION IN THE CINEMATIC
COMMUNICATION

Of visual phenomena

WITHOUT THE USE OF INTERTITLES

(a film without intertitles)

WITHOUT THE HELP OF A SCENARIO

(a film without a scenario)

WITHOUT THE HELP OF THEATRE
(a film without actors, without sets, etc.)

This new experimentation work by Kino-Eye is directed towards the creation of an authentically international absolute language of cinema—ABSOLUTE KINOGRAPHY—on the basis of its complete separation from the language of theatre and literature.”

Vertov called himself a disciple of Mayakovsky, but an avowed enemy of the fiction film. Scenario/script he declared to be a fraud committed upon the film people by the literary ones. The film is self-consciously avantgarde as Vertov uses multiple special techniques like the double exposure, fast motion, slow motion, split screen etc.

He articulates his position in a poetic soliloquy in his essays on cinema—

“I’m an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I’m in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse’s mouth. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. This is I, the machine, manoeuvring in the chaotic movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations. Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you.”

These films amply proved cinema’s ability to be independent of literary arts and theatre. They also showed how cinema documents the reality—in this case of big cities—in micro-details.

In France, too, Rene Clair and others were making some outstanding films like *The Crazy Ray [Paris Qui Dort]* taking a Sci-Fi idea set in Paris, in 1917. City had begun to feature prominently in European films as the theatre of action. In fiction films also some outstanding work was happening in Europe.

F.W. Murnau in Germany had created a feature length fiction film, *The Last Laugh*, which was distinguished by not having any inter-titles that spell out the dialogues. The quality of its set design was outstanding; it created the lobby, the exterior, and the interior of a Five Star hotel, the city streets, workers’ quarters, and even rain with great authenticity inside the film studio. A leading historian of cinema Paul Rotha said that it “definitely established the film as an independent medium of expression... Everything that had to be said...was said entirely through the camera...*The Last Laugh* was cine-fiction in its purest form; exemplary of the rhythmic composition proper to the film.”

In Hollywood, slapstick comedy had proved to be a globally popular form. It was a form that had a fast paced

narrative, eccentric characters and behavioural gags. City ambiance was ideal for this. Even the crime stories were ideally situated in big cities.

Urbanity of Cinema

Cinema in fact, was born as an urban phenomenon and has essentially remained so in its execution, although not necessarily in content. Any film industry has to be situated in a big city as the large infrastructure for production centres [studios and a variety of locations], technological facilities, other material resources and exhibition centres [theatres] can only be located in the cities. Going to movies became an important form of urban life especially after the growth of urban theatres. In fact, Hollywood was a wayside, a non-descript suburb of Los Angeles till the American film industry moved in there. Cinema seems to have repaid the debt to its urban matrix handsomely. Cinema has been largely instrumental in identifying, popularizing, propagating and bestowing iconicity to cities. Cinema established, popularized and bestowed iconic value on several cities of the world by depicting them on screen. The large multitudes of people, who have never been to New York, Paris and London identify with these cities in the form of the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel tower and Big Ben with Westminster, respectively, which they have seen in film after film. Some of the dramatic scenes from famous films have been filmed around these locations converting them into permanent public memories. Audiences always retain strong impressions of the larger than life images that they have seen in films of railways, buildings, squares, streets, pavements, monuments, gardens, cars, buses, trams, shops, homes, mansions and the dramatic human behaviour in those environments.

Mumbai—The Big Bad City of Hindi Cinema

Indian cinema began in the mythological mode and had to wait till the 1920s, i.e., when the Phalke era got over, to create urban narratives. We find a few prominent examples of cities and urban contexts in the films made in the 1930s. Prabhat’s *Manoos [Aadmi]*, *Shejari [Padosi]*, *Kunku [Duniya Na Mane]*, New Theatres’s *President*, Master Vinayak’s *Bramhachari* and *Brandi Ki Botal* and Bombay Talkies film *Kismet* are some of the prominent films made in the 1930s and 1940s in Hindi cinema. City serves as a backdrop and we do not see too many outdoor scenes barring an exception like *Brandi ki Botal* by Vinayak, which has long sequences of processions and rallies. This was due to the limitations of equipment, with the shooting largely confined to the studios; although street shots and songs were at times filmed on location.

But it is actually in the 1950s that the city begins to get some shape in Hindi films.

The case of Mumbai is particularly noteworthy in the context of mainstream Hindi cinema. CST, Marine Drive and The Gateway of India are the three iconic places that tell its audiences that the city is Mumbai. Significantly, these locations typically form the backdrop when a character enters Mumbai and usually it is a case of migration, quite often a forced one. This cinematic topography has not undergone any change over the decades as the locations themselves are the permanent [unchanged] landmarks of the city and they have been internalized by the audiences over the generations. Who else have internalized these landmarks can be gauged from the fact that the historic terrorist attacks meant to blacken the prestige of the city permanently were also mounted on these very locations in the year 2008.

Raj Kapoor's *Shree 420* is particularly significant in the sense it defines Mumbai of the 1950s in satirical terms. First it establishes the character of the immigrant to the city as a vagabond making his way towards the city from Allahabad in UP. He has an encounter with a hypocritical rich man driving with his family to Mumbai and then has several encounters on the road with animals, common folks and different landscapes through which he finds his way to Mumbai. As soon as he arrives in Mumbai [the shot showing CST in the background establishes that], he is kind of lost in the hustle and bustle of the city, where everyone is rushing somewhere and no one has any time for him till he finds his way to a beggar standing by the roadside.

I consider this sequence of scenes to be quite significant as it offers a rich reading of many themes. First of all the protagonist arrives in Mumbai as a village bumpkin, a simpleton from Allahabad, UP. He has grown up as an orphan. His worldly belongings are nothing but a small bundle tied to his stick. He is dressed outlandishly wearing a hat, a coat and trousers. He obviously is neither realistic nor entirely original but his persona is a quote from Charlie Chaplin's screen persona. His journey to Mumbai is also more symbolic as he travels to Mumbai from UP meeting caravans of camels [Rajasthan] and the Dashehra procession of elephants at the palace of the Maharaja of Mysore. His entry to Mumbai is atop an elephant commanded by sadhus and the entry point is clearly CST. It is a busy hour and in the heart of the city no one has got anytime for this man, except the beggar. This is the first of the many ironies that follow. His conversation with the beggar ends with the concluding remark by the beggar—'if you are an educated man, hardworking and honest too, then the only option for you to make a living in Mumbai is to beg.'

The topography of these scenes is populated by various types. The rustic Marathi *kelewali*, the bania who slips off the banana skin, the naked street urchin, the Gujarati speaking Bohra trader, the middle class heroine [Nargis] and the Hindi speaking beggar are meant as signs of the cosmopolitan nature of the city. The immigrant's resilience, never say die spirit, the will to survive and prosper in the city—despite a discouraging introduction—is best expressed in the dramatic utterance by Raj Kapoor, when he boasts of "buying" the city with Rs. 40 that he has borrowed from the Bohra merchant.

There is more to the theme of migration as shown in our films. The industrial urbanization was imposed upon Indians. This used to be an unsettling even a traumatic experience for the majority, who make up the joint family based agrarian society and culture and may be still is, in some degree. The city remains a baffling, disorienting experience for people not empowered due to the lack of education and other opportunities. Staying in cities became mandatory due to the economic condition, but the existence is far from comfortable; hence we see a love-hate relationship with the city always present in the collective and individual psyche. City as hell is an idea that readily meets with approval of this audience. And Mumbai became *that* big city in our mainstream films—*bada shahar* as the beggar keeps repeating. This sequence written by K. A. Abbas has become archetypal, as in films after films we find that the theme and the location is repeated. Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* made in the 1980s shows a rootless man walking outside CST to signal his arrival into Mumbai. The commentary informs us that he is just one among many who flock to the city every day to meet their destinies and where he comes from is not important.

City as a Polemical Concept

Let me share an experience of a taxi driver hailing from UP in this context. He plies his taxi mostly in the western suburbs of Mumbai. One evening as he drove to western express highway in Bandra, he saw a huge mass of pedestrians walking towards their homes in the suburbs. This was the returning hour after the daily work was over. Usually these multitudes would travel by public transport and it was the most unusual sight. Enquiries with fellow cabbies revealed that there had been multiple bomb-blasts an hour ago and the trains were not plying. People had no option but to walk 10/20 kms to reach their homes. Suddenly, there sprang up a spontaneous movement among the walkers. They began to stop all passing private vehicles, with the request to the drives to accommodate as many people as they could in their

cars. And that is how most of the people reached home or at least close to their homes that evening. This was in the year 2006. To my knowledge no media really reported this. Recounting the experience to me the taxi driver said—*Saab, yaha na aisa bhi hota hai. Bambai achha shahar hai. Yahan nake nake pe police hain. Humein security hai. Kuch ho gaya to sab sambhal lete hain. Bahut achha shahar hain Bambai!* [Sir, such things also take place in this city. Mumbai is a good city. You have police on every street-corner. We feel secure. If any untoward thing happens, all come together and face it. Mumbai is really a very good city.]

To a man coming from an economically limited and socio-politically stressful environment of rural UP, Mumbai seemed to offer a better habitat. In fact, I find ironically, that a lot of complaining about the city emanates from middle and upper classes these days. Mumbai is finished! —is a favourite refrain of those, who lead a much better quality of life in material terms as compared to the taxi drivers. This conversation took place about 50 years after *Shree 420*.

In this context, I would like to state that to me the city is always a polemical concept. A city has two principal narratives—the official one and the unofficial ones. There is always an official version of the city in terms of its socio-political identity. The political, bureaucratic and industrial-business elite define the city in one way and this version always has the present definition and a futuristic scenario. The slogans of changing Hyderabad to Cyberabad and Mumbai to Shanghai are two prominent examples that can be quoted here. Utopic aims, alluring phrases, developmental plans and statistics are the main themes of the script that is spelt out in materialistic terms. These data are attractively packaged to give a bird's eye view or a brochure view of the city.

But, the lived realities of the city can be, and often are, at variance with official versions. It is left to the poets, writers, painters, filmmakers and thinkers to give us the living pictures of a city. They bring individuality, identity and three-dimensionality to the abstract data. The semi-literate man of Kamathipura in Manto's story informs his impressed audience about the war that will soon start in Europe which is in *Vilayat*; Narayan Surve's poems speak of proletarian aspirations; Namdeo Dhasal's poems assert the subaltern existence in an explosive manner; *Bhau Padhye* chronicles the verbal, physical and psychological violence that was the result of many forms of sexual repression of the lower and lower middle classes in Mumbai. Arun Kolatkar's *Kala Ghoda* poems are

impressionistic pictures of a microcosm of the city—a prominent square that he refers to by its popular and colloquial name. Similarly, we find the fishermen building their tiny boats, travellers in suburban trains, a slum dweller writing a letter home, the erratic and dense cluster of houses in the paintings of Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan.

There have been very few documentary films made on life in Mumbai city. Anand Patwardhan's *Bombay Hamara Shahar* [Bombay, Our City] made in 1985 remained polemical, inciting strong reactions to it. The film tells the story of the daily battle for survival of the 4 million slum dwellers of Bombay, who at that point of time made up nearly half the city's population. Although they make up the city's workforce as industrial labourers, construction workers, domestic servants and the like, they are denied basic city utilities like electricity, sanitation, and water. Slumdwellers also face the constant threat of demolition of their huts and the prospect of eviction. This seems particularly inhuman as at that time the campaign to 'beautify' the city was on in Mumbai. *Bombay Hamara Shahar*, being a non-fiction film, presents the problems of the subjects in their own words. It also conveys official versions through the statements of government officials and others.

This film brought out the stark reality that mainstream Hindi fiction films have been shying away from.

Looking at a City Surreally

Lastly, I want to discuss a short film that looks at the city's development in a surreal manner to make some strong points.

Chen Kaige's Chinese short film—*100 Flowers Hidden Deep*—is a sharp critique of the development of Beijing in recent times. The gigantic scale of the process tramples underneath many metaphysical and cultural nuances that shape the lives of the citizens. This is brought out through an amusingly surreal story.

The complexity of city life goes on changing and the depiction of it on screen always makes demands on filmmakers to express the new realities in new ways. In doing so, film language also keeps evolving.

This has become a very wide spectrum and what I have done in this presentation is to put at your disposal a few aspects of this wide ranging topic.

[Note: Extracts from all the films discussed in the talk were screened for the benefit of the audience.]