

CONFLICTING MINDSCAPE: THE MOUNTAINSCAPE IN CINEMATIC IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper, as its point of departure, assumes that the mountain space exerts subtle power over people, eliciting a broad range of emotions and meaning. The Himalayas, within the film text, consists of a constructed space and this space reflects, like a mirror, the mental, emotional and psychological condition of the characters and their perspective of life. Overwhelming one's entire being, the Himalayas reveal philosophical connotations as well as quite tactfully dismantle any established idea of the Self. Through the reading of selected films, the aim is to explore how a difference in viewpoints, attitudes and approaches of the characters towards their respective environments is a reflection of the characters' own internal disruptions—and at the same time a feedback loop from the external to the inner landscape. In other words, the connection between the external environment and the internal geography becomes conspicuous as the mountains transform into a metaphor of sentiments with the contours shaped in cinematic imagination.

KEYWORDS: *Mountains Cape, Cinematic Imagination, Film Studies*

INTRODUCTION

The paper, as its point of departure, assumes that the mountain space exerts subtle power over people, eliciting a broad range of emotions and meaning. The Himalayas, within the film text, consists of a constructed space and this space reflects, like a mirror, the mental, emotional and psychological condition of the characters and their perspective of life. Overwhelming one's entire being, the Himalayas reveal philosophical connotations as well as quite tactfully dismantle any established idea of the Self. Through the reading of selected films, the aim is to explore how a difference in viewpoints, attitudes and approaches of the characters towards their respective environments is a reflection of the characters' own internal disruptions—and at the same time a feedback loop from the external to the inner landscape. In other words, the connection between the external environment and the internal geography becomes conspicuous as the mountains transform into a metaphor of sentiments with the contours shaped in cinematic imagination.

The mountain space becomes a metaphor of displacement and disorientation in some cases while in another it becomes the link with surveillance and control. The mountains undoubtedly have a connotation of abstraction. Cultural geographer Yu-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977) draws attention to the love of place (topophilia) and the transformation of space into place: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (6). One of the key concepts for Tuan is experience. He sets out to answer the question: "What is the nature of experience and of the experiential perspective?" (7). He also asks: "What gives a place its identity, its aura? (4).

To explore these intrigues the paper is divided into two sections. The first part is the reading of *Road to Ladakh* (2004) a short film by Ashvin Kumar. Set in the wilderness moonscape of Ladakh, the road journey through the mountains provides a backdrop for weird encounters between two people who are outsiders, lonely and crave for contact. On a quest, amidst the mountains, it is a clash of elusiveness and engagement, suspicion and sensitivity, the colossal and the infinitesimal. And, embedded in the process, is an attempt to discover the 'self' or lose it in order to rediscover. In the second part, with *Frozen*, Shivaji Chandrabhushan's 2007 black and white feature film, the paper explores how Himalayas become the setting for the trials and tribulations of a family against nature and nature of things. The comfort that the family draws from the cold but familiar surroundings of the mountain changes to a harsh, ceaseless and irreversible conflict when the army moves in and settles across their doorstep.

For me, as the mountains become a metaphor, they form a fundamental structure of language and cognition (Goatly, 2007), helping to conceive the viewer's experiences and construct representations in terms of other experiences and representations. In the selected films, mountains are not just a means of creating decorative linguistic expressions, but it is central in textual interpretation, as metaphors are supposed to be: "Metaphor is also an important organizing principle of the narrative and a means of conveying meaning efficiently, and pleasantly, by the association of signs, or through the interaction of more or less complex, basic or conventional, cognitive structures" (Goatly, 2007: 21-22).

National Award-winner and Oscar nominated filmmaker Ashvin Kumar's *Road to Ladakh* is a 48 minute short film that premiered in 2004. In the film the road journey and the strange encounters that follow provide a dramatic backdrop for a relationship that develops between Shafiq, who is a criminal/terrorist, and a city-based, coke snorting, fashion model Sharon. Irrfan Khan (*The Warrior*) and Koel Purie (*Everybody Says I'm Fine*) lead this surreal rites of passage encounter between a dysfunctional model and an ultra-focussed, strong-silent stranger who are thrown together by chance. Set in the magnificent wilderness moon-scape of Ladakh, India, the road journey and the strange encounters that follow provide a dramatic backdrop for the relationship that develops.

Both are outsiders, both are lonely; both crave the human contact that their roles in society deny them. Tentatively they search each other out in a film that is poised between elusiveness and engagement, suspicion and tenderness - at once hilarious and sinister, bizarre and moving, psychedelic and intensely real, *Road to Ladakh* is an original story scripted, edited and produced by director Ashvin Kumar. Both, being outsiders and lonely, find themselves in a new terrain: geographical and emotional. Both seem to be craving for the human contact that their roles in society have denied them. They are trying to escape their 'selves'. Will the mountains help? For me, the mountains offer a space, similar to what Bhabha refers as the "third space", described as "a liminal space... a transitory space, a space other, a third space that is not here / there, but both" (De Toro, 1999, p. 20). The road through the Himalayan Mountains creates such a "third space"—both in physical and emotional terms.

Within the postmodern space theory, the temporal and geographical space of the time is allowed to reach across and speak to constructed space and time. As such, the two characters are found caught in that space, geographically and metaphorically. They can either go forward or backward, there isn't another direction. Standing by the road, the stereotypical structure of centre and periphery is questioned, and hence a new exploration must be initiated, as Bhabha writes: "negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, opening out, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference..." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 219) While the characters

negotiate the steering wheel through the trek, following each other, they bargain with their lives. The road to Ladakh is then the marginal space where neither familiarity nor the otherness holds sway. As the liminality is staged, the meaning must come out from the stranger and the nature, out of the uncertain and even dangerous theatre of communication, which is taking place between Sharon and Shafiq.

When both get thrown into an unfamiliar landscape with very little warning, they make an effort to hear the other's story. The desire to know arguably inaugurates a contact that has to be one of negotiation rather than simple appropriation. What follows are ambivalent encounters and exchanges. The connection between internal moods and external landscape is not as obvious, but looking closely, it is the landscape that shapes their reactions—unlike in the city; they don't formally introduce themselves, but take each other for granted. Even looking for some anchorage in the other. They are just there, just as the mountains are. They seem to have been abandoned, left to fend for themselves, even feeling inadequate at times but as they drive through the rutted terrain, they seem to be finding one self, shedding their defenses. The rough and rugged landscape doesn't change, but offers a ground for the human psyche to play out. As Wilson Harris, while offering a new vision of land and identity, asserts that one must seek to construct a new means of addressing the [mountains] beyond the dualism of the materialism and the metaphysical, "a world habituated to the pre-emptive strike of conquistadorial ego" (Harris, 1984) The 'self' is surrendered to the non-place authority that the mountains demonstrate, which is absolute and even intriguing. The two, as they begin to find their own bearings, the sexual tension between the two heats up. They end up making love, which begins as a lesson for Shafiq. But since Sharon learns the truth about Shafiq's identity, she must then choose: should she leave him knowing that he would be killed or she should stay? She walks out on him, teary eyed, nevertheless determined to leave. On the other hand, Shafiq yearns to prolong their 'togetherness' and holds her hand but then immediately lets go of her, waking up to his immediate reality.

Whether viewed as a spiritual quest towards redemption or the journey of the anti-Odysseus, it wouldn't have had the same intensity but for the mountains and the ranges that make the cold desert, not any other. The stark barrenness of the slopes underscores the basic instincts of human mind, without the availability of multiple choices, as would be in cosmopolitan background. And, order and harmony does not really exist in the external world but is wished to be a product of human emotions and relationships.

Shivajee Chandrabhushan's 2007 film *Frozen* is a sombre journey of imaginative and impulsive teenager, Lasya, who lives with her father Karma, an apricot jam-maker and younger brother Chomo in a remote village in the Himalayas. Pristine snow capped mountains surround their tiny hamlet and barren harsh land stretches for miles into nowhere. As the army settles nearby, the dream-like existence is interrupted by inevitable odds, one after the other.

The story explores the emotional landscape of the siblings as they come of age in a place where people have no warmth for each other. Hence, the title "Frozen", besides being suggestive of the surroundings—snow, and no scope for mobility. Karma, the father, is a character devised as the pillar and anchor to his children. He, like the mountains around him, is a constant: "The very business of survival in a landscape identifies... the difference between connecting and alienating attitudes towards land. This quickly comes down to a matter of personal integrity" (Gifford, 2001, p. 88). For the father, the house at its very location is the only home where the family can survive and he says so to the Army officer.

Interestingly, it is not words that help define how these characters are connected to and react to the landscape around them. For instance, the father who struggles to make a living does not philosophize their existence or the besieging landscape. The filmmaker's intention is not to convey the idyllic background, but to underscore the hard, scrabbling physical labour that a life in tranquility calls for. The notion about being one with the land is something lived and felt rather than verbalized. The father physically traverses the harsh landscape to sustain life, as if trying to say that to understand the cycles of life, it is essential to dig at the earth and partake in the world around at the most basic level—turning the wheel, straining his back, carrying the loads uphill, burden of beast—as in one needs to get physical with it to learn the nuances of existence. If they don't, it will not be a matter of switching philosophical tack or theoretical approach. It will be a matter of dying. Karma is constantly on the verge of being defeated by the conditions but he survives it through his faith in wholesome thought and action. From another perspective, Karma—the name means *karm*, to act—reminds somewhat of the myth of Sisyphus, labouring and striving to achieve against the hostile forces. Though his only tragic flaw is attachment to the terrain, the mountains.

His daughter Lasya, on the other hand, is not precocious. She chooses to act upon her impulses that are devoid of responsibility and more for self-fulfillment. She wallows in the landscape, feels free, and is never haggard by its discomfort. She makes her own imprint of reality, which has and would never get an endorsement. In the end, after the death of her father, she feels settled in the confines of the dilapidated house, unlike the boundless freedom she used to enjoy, sprinting around in the hills.

For the filmmaker the story telling was not intended to soothe or placate the viewer but to probe, explore and inspire a sense of inquiry. Ladakh is not just the backdrop but also a cast; not merely a location for telling the story but also the subject that tells one. For, beneath the quiet of the Himalayan Snow Mountains, punctuated by the Army specks, is a frenzy of the creation and the destruction. Karma and his children are alienated from the social world, living almost in isolation, yet the family is unable to escape the insatiable greed of the society. The general decay of human behaviour under the influence of greed and lust being the opposite polarity to Karma's simplicity and noble intentions is important to the story telling. Against the cold environment is juxtaposed a sense of warmth of the relationship between father and daughter. In the winter season, the bleak landscapes appear as scabs in the background. The Army element is more of a metaphor to underline the inevitability of misfortune and the dilemma that follows. They have reasons to be there, but reasons alone are never enough to explain the tragedies of existence.

While the black and white filming—as if all colors are superficial—conveys the intensity of the story, the narrative style relies heavily on images and sound—the still and serene mountains, with snowfall being the inevitable action, the dog expressing the undercurrents. The long shot and lengthy takes of the mountains though come in as punctuation intended to break the tempo but more significantly I feel it pushes the viewer into “the thing” in question and focus, shifting into a more contemplative mode. The mountain shots also emphasize the thoughts that couldn't have been put in words—illustrating asymmetrical relationships and investigating the ideas of forgiveness and revenge, deceit and generosity, confinement and freedom and struggle and surrender.

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