

## What's in the Backdrop: Representation of Landscape in Bollywood Cinema

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### Abstract

Representation of landscape images is a ubiquitous feature of Bollywood films that provides cinematicscape to the storyline and aims to appeal to the sentiments and emotions of the audience by engaging with the narrative. Landscape images engage in the process of making and unmaking of meanings because of their symbolic value that constitute a sense of place and underpin human relations with immediate and distant spaces. Notwithstanding the ubiquity of its images in Bollywood cinema and its centrality to forming the collective imagination and, thereby, the sense of place for audience, landscape is yet to find its place in wider social discussion and debates, especially in the developing world. This paper critically examines the visual representation of landscape in Bollywood films and the various interpretations that can be found in both its production and consumption within the realm of the culture industry.

**Keywords** Landscape, Bollywood, Cinematic landscapes, Mediated landscapes, Mediation



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# What's in the Backdrop: Representation of Landscape in Bollywood Cinema

Naveen Mishra

## Introduction

The representation of landscape is a ubiquitous feature of Bollywood films that provides cinematicscape to the storyline and aims to appeal to the sentiments and emotions of the audience by engaging with the narrative. Landscape images used in films may appear natural or fictitious, however they are part of a larger function in an attempt to build a narrative of spatial consumption — a craft that goes through a strategic selection and rejection of images keeping various cinematic aspects in mind. More importantly, these images engage in the process of the making and unmaking of meanings because of their symbolic value that constitutes a sense of place and underpins human relations with immediate and distant spaces. Despite landscape's importance in contributing to both the aesthetic and narrative qualities of movies, very little has been discussed or said about its visual representation and importance in the constantly growing body of academic research on Bollywood cinema. In a society where films are embedded in the day-to-day life of people, they not only represent, but define the very way of life and, where film stars are revered, it becomes increasingly important to critically examine the various aspects that go into the formulation of visual narratives vis-à-vis their consumption. Although landscape images are largely seen as mere props that provide spatial context to the film, their function extends into various obscure areas that shape identity, power relations and cultural understanding of spaces.

Depictions from pastoral lands to wilderness, snow-capped mountains to eerie deserts, urban to semi-urban and rural landscapes form part of an individual's day-to-day experience and/or fantasies, evoke emotions, trigger aspirations, nurture memories and act as a 'medium of exchange

between the human and the natural, the self and the other...'(Mitchell, 1994, p. 5). Notwithstanding the ubiquity of its images in Bollywood cinema and its centrality to forming the collective imagination and, thereby, the sense of place for audience, landscape is yet to find its place in wider social discussion and debates in India. It is yet to mature from being a mere spectacle to becoming a matter of social relevance with its manifestations in various forms such as 'landscape democracy', currently a matter of academic and policy discourse in some European academic circles.

The cultural and social importance of landscape in India is yet to be realized, and its potential in contributing to social well-being remains under-explored due to its absence in public discourse. Given their immense symbolic value, landscape images are part of a broader dialogue between cinema and the audience that is 'grounded in culture' in constructing social reality, negotiating identities and shaping the world view, and thus cannot be treated as a given (Greider & Garkovich, 1994, p. 2, 3). This paper critically examines the visual representation of landscape in Bollywood films and various interpretations that can be found in both its production and consumption within the realm of the culture industry. In explaining how through mediation, the spectacle of landscape in Bollywood forms an ideological basis and feeds into social identity, it is underscored that collective social imaginations of landscape offer a fertile ground for a social discourse to emerge on preservation, association, and deeper engagement with the landscapes — both natural and modernist. Landscape as an element of social discourse can encourage collective well-being, harmony with nature, and enhanced engagement with the human habitat and, as such, it holds the potential to rethink spatial development in greater detail and broader totality. Whereas discourse over natural landscapes can foster the need for conservation and sensitivity, the modernist/manmade landscape can be envisaged in ways that bridge the gap between humans and

nature and emerges as a collective social activity that involves both experts and non-experts—from designers to architects, conservationists to policy-makers, as well as the common people. In providing evidence that there exists a great deal of content for landscape imagination in mainstream Bollywood movies, and through mediation of how it feeds into social identity, ideology and cultural meanings of landscape, it is underlined that landscape can graduate from being a mere spectacle to becoming a matter of social concern, evident in wider public and policy discourse.

## **2. Landscape and its cinematic representation**

Any deep engagement with the idea of landscape representation and mediation in Bollywood or otherwise, can only be fully realized by exploring the various discussions that regard landscape as a body of text, a system of signs that can be read and interpreted for meanings. Mitchell (1994), for example, regards landscape as ‘textual systems’ that can be read for meanings and interpretations (p. 1). Greider and Garkovich (1994) observe that every landscape is a ‘symbolic environment created by the acts of conferring meaning to the nature and the environment...from a particular angle of vision and through a special filter of values and beliefs’ (p. 2). The representation of landscape, especially in popular cinema, extends its symbolic value in constructing meanings and placing it in a particular cultural context. Its cinematic representation is an extension from geographical to virtual space, from its unarticulated presence to an articulated placement in a narrative, from an unmediated feature of space to a mediated template of consumption, from an absolute space to a perspectival space.

The understanding of landscape in popular perception is often one of natural scenery, works of nature or human replication of the same, ‘...framed within a sketch or painting, composed within the borders of a map...’ (Cosgrove, 2004, p. 61) or in the form of scenically designed spaces

manicured to maximum aesthetic perfection. Landscape is primarily seen from the spectacles of beauty and aesthetics, something that appeals to the senses and provides visual comfort. But such a simplistic reading of landscape evades many critical questions with respect to its production, representation, embedded meanings, ideologies and its cultural placement. Landscape, for Arler and Mellqvist (2014), is ‘delicate’ and involves a series of ‘intangible features’. As they note, ‘stories and narratives, meanings and perceptions, property rights and administrative boundaries are as much inherent parts of landscapes as mountains and valleys, rivers and roads, trees and houses’ (p.17). It is a medium of representation of meanings, a collection of signs and symbols, a fragment of space, a discursive plane, an historical entity, a natural given or a manmade territory that exists in its various forms such as natural, artificial, urban and rural. In its natural form it may be represented in the form of forests, farms, mountains, meadows, animals, birds, rivers, or as a manmade territory in the form of buildings, skyscrapers, roads, dams, parks and gardens. Its usage spans a plethora of representations used to characterize various visual — natural, manmade, rural, urban — and perceptual — textual, intellectual, political — topographies. Either way, landscape is a space of production and consumption, identity formation and meaning-making. In Bollywood films, the romantic sequences are often coupled with exotic Western landscapes that aim to heighten the emotional experiences of the audience in connecting with the film scene — almost like a ready template of love/romance set against the nature signifying a carefree, independent and uninterrupted love/romance away from the conservative values and the prying eyes of the moral police that enforce morality, conformity and contradict modern thought.

Picture 1: Screen grabs from the film *Dil Wale Dulhania le Jayenge* (1995) (The Bravehearted will Take the Bride):



The picture above is a romantic drama set against the scenic backdrops of Europe. Regarded as a ‘phenomenon’ and a ‘cult love story’ in the media, DDLJ, has been one of the most successful movies in Bollywood screening for 1000 weeks in a Mumbai theatre since its release in 1995. (Source: YouTube, Eros Films)

DDLJ is a classic example of post-liberalization film that attempted to set a whole new narrative of a progressive, global and modern India. Alongside the story, the film builds a certain sequential landscape narrative deeply embedded in the backdrop of the film as the various stages of *Raj* and *Simran*’s love story moves from London to Switzerland and finally to their native village in Punjab, India. Insomuch that if the landscape images are removed or replaced with one another in the film, the story will lose its vigor. Whilst key landscape images of London such as Trafalgar Square, River Thames, Tower Bridge, Westminster Bridge and Leicester Square are depicted to establish the individual contrasting identities of the characters, the landscape images of Zweisimmen, Gstaad, St. Mauritius Church, Saanen and Montbovon in Switzerland witness the various stages of their love story. The latter part of the story is set in a village in Punjab, with mustard fields and paternal home as its establishing images signifying homecoming, nostalgia, back to the roots, motherland and family, culture and values, inter alia, where their love story, after

much conflict in the family, reaches a happy end as *Simran* fights back to evade arranged marriage for Raj.

Landscapes, as Jackson (1991) notes, are socially constructed for the purpose of staging human dramas. Their portrayal is never experimental; rather they simply aim to capture the existing meanings and relationships that already exist in the heads of the audiences and provide specific emotional cues from fear, loathing and love, to spiritualism, hyperrealism, romanticism and surrealism. Any arbitrary representation of landscape can result in a lack of emotional stimulation due to the lack of connection between seeing, recognising and relating. For example, when a song sequence is being filmed in Switzerland it is bound to focus on the Alps, meadows and snowcapped mountains, creating a ‘lived’ feeling of being-there, feeling-that in the audience, translating as a model of honeymoon destination and lovers paradise. This trend is far more evident in *masala* movies that, according to Desai (2004), are ‘intertextual films of Bollywood often with familiar structure, plot, sequences, and stock characters’ (p.108). Masala movies, in colloquial terms, vaguely refer to formula movies that ensure a perfect combination of tried and tested elements such as songs, dance, drama, action, emotion and foreign locations that ensure maximum box office success to which films like *Singh is King* (2008), *Dabangg* (*Fearless*, 2010), *Rowdy Rathore* (2012), *Boss* (2013), *Action Jackson* (2014) are just a few examples. Over the years, extraordinary landscape images, both modern and natural, have emerged as an integral component in achieving a near-perfect recipe for formula movies in Bollywood. Whilst this may appear to be a logical commercial activity, it underpins the broader issue of mediation vis-à-vis image construction that perpetuates ideological beliefs and biases and acts as a site for complex power relations between the filmmaker/signifier and the audience/spectator.

## 2.1 Landscape and ideology

The images we see in everyday life shape our social realities, contribute to dominant perspectives and relative world views, and affect how we relate to our immediate and distant spaces. Landscape, as Taylor (2008) notes, is a ‘cultural construct, a product of the mind framed by ideologies and experience’ (p.3). Meinig (1979) presents an interesting analysis of landscape from ten vantage points: landscape as nature, wealth, place, habitat, artefact, system, problem, ideology, history and aesthetic. He notes that although we all see the same elements and features in a given landscape, our understanding of the elements assumes ‘...meaning only through associations...fitted together according to some coherent body of ideas’ (p.34). It is through this interpretive mechanism of signs and symbols, and their association with the narrative, the ideological content is acquired that works to reinforce cultural readings and social beliefs.

Our relationship with our habitat and social spaces incorporate ideological principles that govern our knowledge systems. This knowledge directly or indirectly affects the development of our manmade landscapes which include, for example, spaces that may be pluralist or exclusivist, accessible or inaccessible, public or private and could be shaped along economic, religious, political, regional, and cultural lines. Thus, ideology is central to how we organize ourselves and negotiate our relationships with the natural or manmade landscapes. For example, urban development in popular Indian perception is a space that boasts high-rise buildings, grand shopping malls, advanced infrastructure, clean neighborhoods, widely accessible public transport, leisure zones and adequate public services. It is a landscape that is orderly, clean and aesthetically pleasant, provides freedom of movement, privacy, and embraces forward looking and progressive social values. The very lack of such advanced urban spaces, except for some metropolitan pockets often identified as ‘posh’ areas, across India makes the glimpses of Manhattan appear exotic and pleasant on the cinema screen. The contrasting representation of foreign and local landscapes that



some Bollywood films illustrate represent a collective fantasy of sophisticated urban, as well as unsullied natural landscapes, and their wider absence across the native geography. The creation of landscape in itself is a translation of the ideologies of a particular culture that town planners, builders and architects infuse into their production of social spaces. As Crawford (2013) notes, ‘our cultural way of believing is manifested physically in the shaping of our cities, suburbs and towns, as well as our relationship to the world beyond our built environments’ (p. 21).

The representation of both indigenous and foreign landscape in Bollywood films carries ideological connotations that create, conform, reinforce and challenge the cultural beliefs of Indian society in terms of ‘our’ and ‘their’ landscape, and the meanings and actions manifested in what Jackson (1991) calls ‘cultural politics’ that refers to a ‘domain in which meanings are constructed and negotiated, where relations of dominance and subordination are defined and contested’ (p.200,cited in Lukinbeal, 2005, p. 13). The representation of Indian landscapes of Mumbai and Delhi to that of Singapore, London and Dubai is a conscious yet mechanical exercise that draws a comparison and underscores inadequacies by juxtaposing remarkable with unremarkable landscapes, modern with pre-modern spaces as evident in numerous films like *Dabang* (Fearless, 2010), *Welcome* (2007), *Dhoom 2* (Blast 2, 2004) which have their stories set in India and song sequences shot in the West. A Western/foreign landscape, apart from its aesthetic qualities, is a landscape of convenience that is acontextual, unregulated and neutral, free from the Indian parameters of right/wrong, cultural and religious sentiments, an entity that represents liberal modern values that can be readily presented and consumed on the cinema screen without much disagreement; taken as reality, if accepted/appreciated; and declared as fiction, if rejected/criticized. Needless to mention, most movies have their romantic sequences shot in Switzerland than in North Indian state of Kashmir, known for its equally beautiful landscapes,

because, apart from bureaucratic hurdles of getting permission to shoot film sequences there, it holds a loaded context due to its troubled past and present, is heavily regulated and can possibly interfere with the film narrative.

As Meinig (1979) notes, ‘any landscape is composed of not only what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads’ (p. 34). It functions through social and cultural processes and manifests as a common-sense entity through its narration and associations. The filmmakers’ careful consideration, especially the cinematographers, of the selection of background imagery in the various scenes of a film, is a dedicated process of attaching landscape images to the existing ideas and connotations that are culturally located. This, according to Lukinbeal (2005), is the process of ‘naturalization; where a narrative seeks to pass off that which is cultural as natural’ (p.13). Similarly, the relationship between audience and images, which appear too simplistic on the surface, is part of an extremely complex fabric of interchanges and interactions between images and multiple imaginations involved in the process from their creation to consumption. Images weaved into a film narrative are not merely there for the narrative, rather they represent a set of meanings, explanations, inferences, points of reference and, more often, manifest as a comprehensive statement of human progress and potential, a dream to aspire to, and a reinforcement of the power of the ‘other’ over ‘us’— the power relation between the collective audience and the proprietors/producers of landscape, the film and the audience, the producer and the consumer. Much of these power relations and meanings are not readily discernable as their meanings are ‘taken for granted’ because they are ‘so tangible, so natural, so familiar’ (Duncan & Duncan, 1988, cited in Kneale, 1998, p. 5). Landscape, thus operates as a body of textual codes in cinema with significance, as Cosgrove (2004) notes, as ‘a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings’ that ‘privileges the sense of sight’ and often emerges as a ‘vital field of expression and contestation’ (p. 61, 63). The cinematic representation

of landscape reinforces this ‘taken-for-granted’ view and “‘naturalize” ways of thinking about the world’ (Kneale, 1998, p. 5). It is a construct carrying embodied ideologies, emotions, dynamics, explanations and interpretations with the purpose of trading meanings — both symbolic and interpretive, the aesthetic abilities of the human mind and heart, a moment of beauty.

## 2.2 Landscape and identity

The spaces that we are part of are central to our identity. The very knowledge and description of the self carries references to space and spatial practices. A great deal of research in cultural geography is dedicated to establishing the centrality of space in socio-culture practices and questions of spatial identity and belonging (Agnew, 2011; Cosgrove, 1984; Escobar, 2001; Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Gustafsson, 2007; Plumwood, 2006; Shields, 2013). If space is a geographical given then place is identity of space or spatial identity inasmuch as every place is space but every space may not, essentially, be place if it lacks spatial practices that together constitute its identity. According to an ancient Greek description of space and place,

Place... is a part of the terrestrial surface that is not equivalent to any other, that cannot be exchanged with any other without everything changing. Instead with space [place as location] each part can be substituted for another without anything being altered...

(Farinelli 2003 in Agnew’s (2011, p. 2)

Place is thus a result of a myriad set of processes that materialize and function simultaneously with humans at the center of it while landscape is a ‘richly inscribed medium through which meanings of place/space are understood’ (Armstrong 2001, p. 14), represented and consumed in both print and visual. The individual or collective actions and experience of a place

together contribute to the making and unmaking of meaning that defines places or creates places within spaces. Tahrir Square, Wall Street, *Jantar Mantar* and Oxford Street are a few examples that in the recent past have seen their identities evolve and transform through individual and collective experiences in both tourism and activism. Place, is the ‘setting for social rootedness and landscape continuity’ (Agnew 2011, p. 8) and is formed as a result of multiple narratives layered together in the stories of individuals and collectives, the architectural monuments, buildings, parks and day-to-day practices evident in myriad local practices and traditions. Identities of places shape and inform the identities of individuals and the collective. Bollywood movies like *Pardes* (foreign land), *Swades* (Own country), *Namaste London* (greetings London) and *Queen* are a few examples that deal with the concept of individual identity and place in telling stories of personal struggles and feats of individuals in both native and foreign lands. *Queen*, for example, tells the story of a naïve and timid Indian girl from a middle class family who sets out on a backpack tour to Europe after her fiancée calls off their wedding. The film, which won several national awards in 2014, neatly captures the concepts of individual identity, self-discovery and new found sense of freedom through the vivid encounters of the protagonist in various prominent locales of Paris, Amsterdam and Delhi. It presents a seamless amalgamation of the story, characters and landscapes like a set of layered narratives weaved together, dealing with the complex issues of identity, liberation and self-discovery with the protagonist’s emotional and physical plane as a site of exploration where the story unfolds.

The questions of place and identity have been well captured in some studies of Indian diaspora and the influence of Bollywood films in negotiating diasporic identities. Bandyopadhyay (2008), for example, analyses the influence of Bollywood movies in Indian diaspora identity construction and notions of home, and in tourism behavior to India, especially in the first and second generation Indian diaspora. Many Bollywood films that deal with the stories of diaspora

often seamlessly reconcile the foreign and Indian landscape images as anchors to the film narrative. *Swades* (Own Country), a 2004 Bollywood film is a case in point that highlights the importance of landscapes in upholding human emotions and identity.



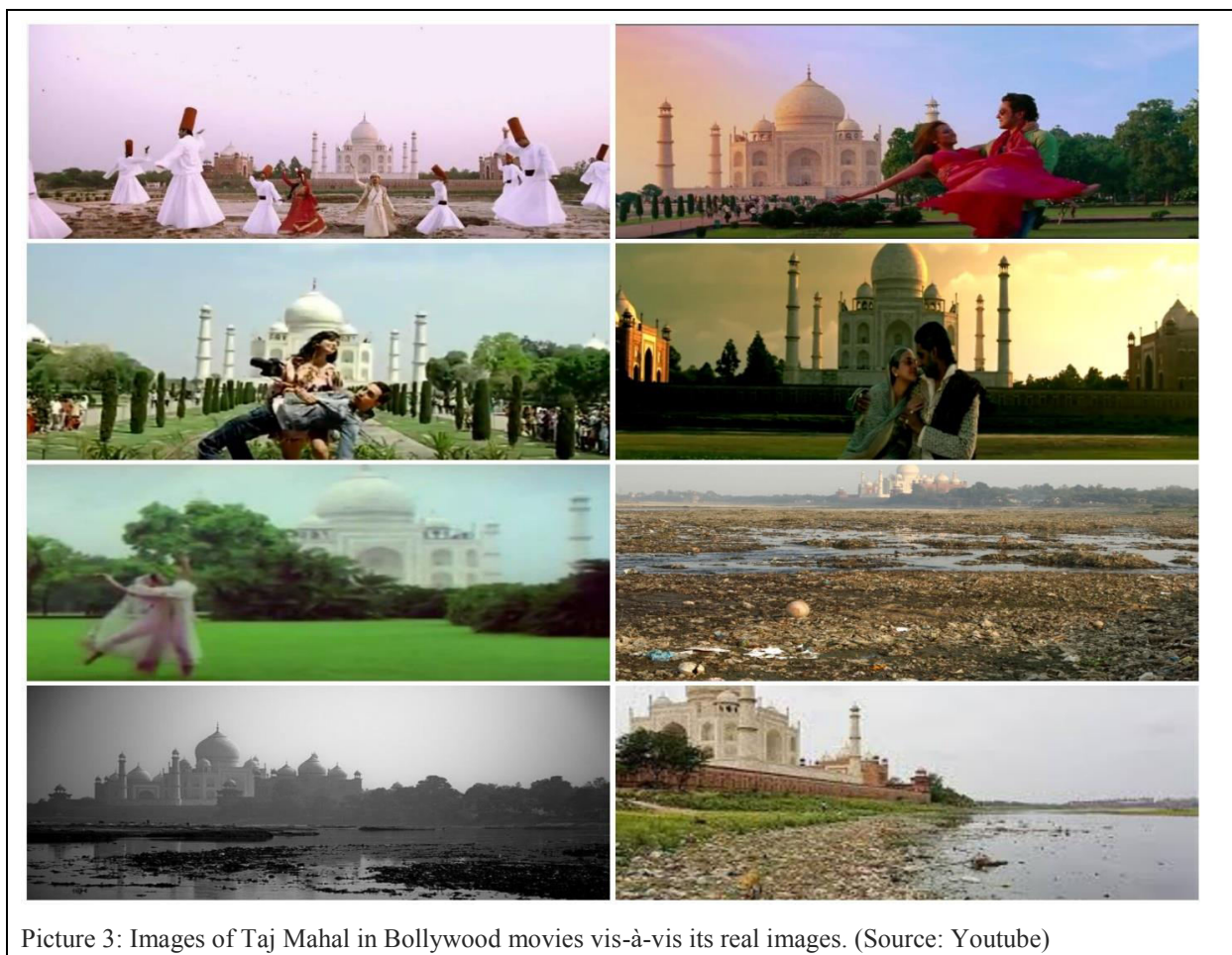
Picture 2: Screen grabs from the film *Swades* (Own Country), a critically acclaimed 2004 Bollywood film set against the backdrop of Florida and rural India. Regarded as ‘one of the best films’ in Indian cinema, *Swades* was a huge commercial success and received widespread appreciation among Indian audiences and the diaspora alike. (Source: YouTube, Eros Films)

The film, as Gajjar (2014) notes, is the first Bollywood film to take its audience from the hot landscapes of Kutch in Gujarat to the NASA research center at Launch Pad 39A of the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida. It is a story of an Indian scientist in NASA and his emotional struggle that begins after a visit to his rural home-town and a quest to make a choice between staying in his current position and relocating to his home country. A large part of the film is set in India, highlighting the rural landscapes, with some parts, at the beginning and at the end, set in the US and depicting key American landscape images (See Picture 2). The ideological struggle is evident

through the landscape imagery where rural images from India are juxtaposed with urban images from America. The conflict within the protagonist's current engagement and his longing for the homeland is vividly depicted in a song, narrated through landscape images of his workplace juxtaposed with the landscape images of his homeland and its people in his memories. Landscape, according to Taylor (2008), acts as a 'repository of intangible values and human meanings that nurture our very existence' and acts as the 'nerve centre of our personal and collective memories' (p. 4). *Swades* adequately grasps the sentiment of nostalgia, anomie and alienation through landscape narrative while underpinning protagonist's emotional turmoil and search for identity.

### **3. Landscape and Mediation**

Mediation of landscape is mediation of meanings defined within a given cultural framework and 'embedded in the production, depiction, and consumption of every cinematic landscape' (Lukinbeal, 2005, p. 14). As Gustafsson (2007, p. 202) notes, '...landscape resides in the act of mediation' and 'our attachments to and understanding of landscapes are necessarily mediated by culture, attitude and experience' (Lukinbeal, 2005, p. 3). Mediation of landscape images in Bollywood attempt to define the importance of ideal landscapes and their social significance and endeavours to capture a certain sense of beauty and aesthetics rooted in the aspirations of the individuals and the collective. For example, the images of the Taj Mahal in movies are edited to remove the unpleasant landscape that surrounds it to meet the imagination of the Taj Mahal in its ideal landscape (See Picture 3).



Picture 3: Images of Taj Mahal in Bollywood movies vis-à-vis its real images. (Source: Youtube)

Not a single film highlights the unpleasant fragments of landscape that surround the Taj Mahal which underscores the convenient and uncritical production, consumption and celebration of the monument which is neither entirely true nor false. Mediation suppresses the creative tension between the real and the virtual image, in that the creative and technological prowess is employed to transform the real into the imagined real on the virtual space of cinemascope, which is unquestionable and acceptable. Its strength lies in successfully annihilating any evidence of conflict that may arise as a result of the difference between fiction and fact. This according to Scarles (2004) is the process of ‘image construction’ that is shaped by a ‘series of mediating processes and practices’ and embodies ‘complex mediating powers’ (p. 1, 2). This is not to say

that the images of projected landscape do not exist but their real and reel experiences are highly unconnected with latter being the imagined reality or fictionalized reality that is far removed from the actual physical experience. A fictionalized reality is the real image lifted, processed and served with technical precision in order to be merged with the fictional narrative that merely serves the spectacle in connecting film with its viewers. It is a case of creating sequential hyper-beauty through the ‘...exaggerated mediated discourse that encourages fiction over fact’ (Scarles 2004, p. 6) and can never be experienced and engaged with exactly in the way it is presented in the cinema, even if one is physically capable of being present in the same landscape.

According to Lukinbeal (2005), the process of meaning construction, representation and consumption of cinematic landscape is rooted in the power relations between the producer and the consumer. This underlines the process of selection abstraction, appropriation of landscape images and its mediation that undergoes a series of pre and post-production techniques in creating a finished product. The power relations in cinemascope are about the precision of the message through images, its larger than life depiction and perfect contextualisation in high definition color, and in music that surpasses the quality of the mundane image that is beyond every expectation and every possibility of being experienced exactly in the same fashion. The power of the films is in their power to take control of the cerebral and emotional capacity of the viewers’ imagination in recreating the ‘real’ into self-referential signs of system that are beyond question and interrogation in their truth and conviction. This is due to the very fact that the same images are instrumental in constructing the idea of the ‘real’ world and the world view through the selection of landscape images that establish, for example, Switzerland as a honeymoon destination, Las Vegas as a party destination and Dubai as a Western experience outside of the West. As Lukinbeal (2005) notes, ‘landscape as spectacle encodes power relations within the gaze’ (p. 11) and the methodical and precise spectacle of images in making sense of the world solicits a dedicated, uncritical spectator



who willingly submits to the power dynamics that he or she is equally a part of by the means of the gaze. Mediation, thus, is a capitalistic process that is audience-centric, engaging in the production of the spectacle for the consumption and the (re)shaping of imagination and reality for the audience.

#### **4. The spectacle of landscape in Bollywood**

The supremacy of Bollywood lies in its strength to reinforce and create new spectacles that provide reference points for engaging with everyday life and its overarching influence over the wider thought processes within society. Its influence is in its ability to make the unusual look usual and acceptable, and excesses of these spectacles on celluloid render any form of fictional reality into a given. According to Kellner (2004) displays of spectacle in media constitutes a ‘media culture’ that ‘...not only takes up the expanding moments of contemporary experience but also provides ever more material for fantasy, dreaming, modelling, thought and behavior, and constructing identities’ (p. 1). The spectacles of song, dance, melodrama, fantasy, myth, suspense, fight and romance, in high definition, are part of the larger *mise-en-scène* that enforce acceptance and blur the line between fiction and reality. The spectacle of landscape in Bollywood cinema caters to the dreams, aspirations and imaginations of the life in celluloid by heightening the spectator’s visual experience and also underpinning Bollywood’s insatiable appetite to bring the unknown to the screen; a visual moment of novelty, a fragment of a faraway land that is ahistorical, acontextual and mediated in a moto-mechanical fashion for the benefit of fiction, like a painting in the living room that is adjusted to the colors of the walls and furniture. This accounts for a visual experience illustrative of the collective imagination and longing for spaces — both natural and manmade — that are aesthetically pleasant, systematically designed and widely accessible; which

are, however, imported due to their dearth in the immediate proximity. For Kellner (2004), '[d]uring the passed decades, the culture industries have multiplied media spectacles, in novel spaces and sites, and spectacle is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life' (p. 1), serving a staple diet for collective imaginations, aspirations, realities and myths.

Dubbed as bromance, *Zindagi Na Milegi Doobara* (You Won't Get another Life) is a story of three friends taking a road trip in Spain and their experiences of bonding, love and friendship during the trip (See Picture 3). In general, the movie deals with the aspects of love, friendship and self-exploration. Landscape images, often in long shots and aerial views, are shown to underscore freedom, self-exploration, introspection, reconciliation and association as the various characters of the film are shown to deal with an array of emotional encounters in friendship and love. Purely laid on an imaginary surface, ZNMD underscores the imagination and aspirations of modern India which is far removed from both the everyday realities of common Indians and the stereotypical and dominant representations of India in the Western narratives.

Bollywood cinema, according to Lenihan (2014), 'holds a central place in the Indian imagination' (p. 22) and the depiction of landscape, as shown in the stills above, is often attributed to the creativity and imagination of the director in using the camera while completely overlooking the concepts of collective imagination and aspirations. Imagination is a commodity in itself that sits at the heart of the Indian culture industry and, according to Appadurai (1990), is part of a global cultural process and is central to all forms of agency. Since its inception, Bollywood has been instrumental in the creation of the popular imagination of India and the world, the self and the other.



Picture 4: Screen grabs from a song from *Zindagi Na Milegi Doobara* (You Won't Get another Life), a 2011 Bollywood comedy drama set against the scenic backdrops of the Spanish landscape. It won many awards for direction and choreography and, in spite of some critical reviews, was a 'runaway hit' and earned approximately US \$28 million worldwide. (Source: Hindustan Times, Eros, Youtube)

From creating a sense of national identity to constructing the worldview, Bollywood has been central to shaping the imagination of the Indian audience, and its popularity and prestige lies in its very ability to present the spectacular on cinema screen. In post-liberalization period, Bollywood cinema has been increasingly instrumental in providing a narrative of modernization and development through the imagination in asserting the identity of India and Bollywood in an increasingly cosmopolitan world, whilst comfortably placing itself outside of the third world narrative as evident in some popular movies of the 90s such as *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (Who am I to You, 1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Big-Hearted will Take Away the Bride, 1995), *Dil to Pagal Hai* (The Heart is Crazy, 1997), *Pardes* (Foreign land, 1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something Happens, 1998). This trend further consolidated with the advent of globalization with movies such as *Mohabbatein* (Love Stories, 2000), *Yaadein* (Memories, 2001), *Dil Chahta Hai*

(The Heart Desires, 2001), Swades (Own Country, 2004), Rock On (2008), among several others, with cosmopolitan stories set in affluent urban backgrounds, transcending local boundaries, challenging traditional thought, highlighting the global modern Indian who seamlessly moves between foreign and local culture and spaces. As Sarkar (2008) notes, ‘in this international space of fantasy an entity like India is caught between the “first world” and the “third world,” the developed and the underdeveloped, the center and the periphery, the modern and the traditional, the global and the local’ (p.47 ) engaging in fantasies of progress and desire of modernity on the silver screen.

Bollywood is a key player in the Indian media-sphere in constructing social reality for Indian society. This is because although part of it is engaged in reflecting the usual realities of everyday life, a large part of it engages in presenting an augmented social reality with a mix of fantasy, comfort and pleasure — a phantasmagorical escape route for momentary pleasure to feed the spectacular. The centrality of Bollywood in constructing the imagination of a progressive and ‘modern’ India for both the Indian audience and the diaspora alike has been well documented (Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Bhatawadekar, 2011; Kaur, 2010). Bollywood movies, as Bandyopadhyay (2008) notes, ‘are located in affluent surroundings; the plots are far removed from the cliché of poverty that India is associated with, yet the emphasis is on Indian tradition and family values’ (p. 92). A similar observation is made by Kaur (2010) who notes that post liberalization Bollywood movies are ‘...generally located in prosperous surroundings and the characters are able to transport themselves to the much-sought-after northern hemisphere without any struggle or conflict’ (p.207).

The romantic representations of extraordinary landscapes from affluent places is integral to this collective imagination which is devoid of the inconsistencies and tensions that actually exist between humans and spaces in India. The distance between subject and object in both real and

virtual settings, between the physical landscape and the individual, the film image and the viewer, operates as space in which the viewer is submerged to feel and experience the landscape and to accept its presence. The protagonist or the character within this space works as an extension to the viewer through which the landscape is felt and experienced. It is the spectacle of sublime seduction and deception, a form of ‘simulacra’ in Baudrillardian (1988) terms, that demands the attention of an uncritical viewer who is analyzing the film on an emotional rather than a logical plane. Bollywood movies, more often than not, aim to cater to the emotions of the movie-goers rather than to their logical abilities and the ones which attempt to cater to the latter risk the chance of failing at the box office. As long as they ethically cater to emotional correctness and carry ample entertainment quotient, they, manage to please the audience.

This idea is well captured by Lenihan (2014) in describing the *masala* films as a catch-all term often used to identify the popular films that are aimed at the masses. Lenihan (2014, p. 21) explains:

In Hindi, masala means an assortment of spices used to prepare what is commonly known as curry. The use of an assortment of spices release different flavours, mixing and matching in strange ways to produce a complex taste that is simultaneously spicy, sour, sweet, hot, and so on. The point is that in a masala it is difficult to distinguish individual spices. Within the language of cinema the term alludes to the whole range of genres and emotions that one can expect to find in a Bollywood film

The *masala* movie tends to be emotionally correct/adequate rather than logically correct/adequate, in that it removes the film narrative from the dichotomy of correct/right and incorrect/wrong whilst blurring the line between fantasy and reality; a quality of popular formula films that has been discussed elsewhere in this essay. Such a spectacle of cinema eludes logic and

rationality and reproduces human emotions as melodramas against the spectacular background of landscape which is used as a canvas laden with awe and grandeur. This world of spectacle, as Best and Kellner (1999) note, ‘...becomes the “real” world of excitement, pleasure, and meaning, whereas everyday life is devalued and insignificant by contrast’ (p. 151).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The represented landscape is not a mere backdrop in Bollywood cinema, rather, as established in this paper, a central organizing principle of the film narrative that shapes popular imagination, aspirations, identity and everyday life of cinemagoers in modern India. The mediation and cinematic representation of landscape, and its centrality to identity, ideology and popular imagination, underscores landscape’s embeddedness in social narratives and their collective consumption and replication in reality. Landscape, thus, is not just a commodity, a source of identity, an element of mediation, a part of individual or collective fantasy and imagination, not just a part of cultural fabric or an ideology and spectacle but far too profound and prolific in both physical and virtual space of creativity, engagement and activity. Cinema is simply one form of engaging the enormous potential of landscape that has been analyzed in this essay and, beyond doubt, there remains far too much that has not been captured and can be further explored. Beyond the scope of cinema, landscape engagement in newly developing areas such as ‘landscape democracy’, only underscores the growing importance of landscape and its centrality to human development.

Given its immense importance in our everyday lives, representations and discussions of landscape in any form can be regarded as a part of social discourse. Both its presence and absence provide a fertile ground for social discussion of how we engage with our social and geographical spaces as much as with our immediate environment. Visual depictions of landscape in cinema

provide an opportunity for a wider social discussion that is, among other things, essential for discerning the details that are at the heart of achieving maximum synergy between humans and geography. The importance of landscape in India is still part of mere imagination in contrast with Europe, for example, where it is central to the wider socio-political discourse, an academic and policy concern, and considered as an ‘essential factor of individual and communal well-being and an important part of people’s quality of life...and consolidation of the European identity’ (Déjeant-Pons, 2002, p. 52). Ideas such as ‘landscape democracy’ and ‘landscape preservation’, gaining momentum in the West, are yet to be pondered in developing societies where there is little or no academic discussion of these concepts.

This is not to say that landscape is of any less importance to the Indian sentiment; nevertheless, it is yet to emerge as a wider social concern. Whereas in literature it is largely limited to the specialist knowledge of agricultural and urban studies, in action it is evident in forest conservation and urban development. In between specialist knowledge and forest conservation efforts, what is missing is the recognition of everyday human interaction and connection with both the extraordinary and ordinary landscapes. This gap is filled in part by Bollywood through its landscape depictions, even though these are only as a backdrop to a film’s narrative. The social significance and importance of modern and natural landscapes in collective consciousness shaped by the media with Bollywood movies at the center of it, in pooling remarkable landscape images from the foreign locations and constructing an eclectic mix of imagination, holds enormous possibilities for initiating a discourse on deeper engagement and preservation of local landscapes. Nevertheless, a methodology and framework for engagement, which is culture specific and socially relevant is yet to be established and explored.

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