

Framing Frontiers: The Suspended Step towards Visual Construction of Geopolitical Borders

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What happens when one entitles a work of art? What is the topos of the title? Does it take place (and where?) in relation to the work? On the edge? Over the edge? On the internal border? In an overboard that is re-marked and reapplied, by invagination, within, between the presumed centre and the circumference? Or between that which is framed and that which is framing in the frame? Does the topos of the title... command the "work" from the discursive and juridical distance of a hors d'oeuvre, a place outside the work, from the exergue of a more or less directly definitional statement, and even if the definition operates in the manner of a performative? Or else does the title play inside the space of the "work", inscribing the legend, with its definitional pretension, in an ensemble that it no longer commands and which constitutes it – the title – as a localised effect?

– Jacques Derrida

The surface of the earth is an assortment of various nations, each divided by rigorous borders marking their national territory. But what makes a nation? Pedagogic definitions will simply try to explain 'nation' as an organised political community occupying a definite territory, having an organised government and possessing internal and external sovereignty. The standard definitions commonly state that the nation needs to occupy a 'definite territory', which makes the border of a nation an obligatory element in the concept of nation.

If we compare this to a work of art and its framing, we recall that Derrida commented on the frame as being something that is neither a part of the painting and yet absolutely intrinsic to it.¹ It is this 'peripherality' that makes the work of art unique, and defines it:

What constitutes [it]... is not simply [its] exteriority as surplus, it is the internal structural link which rivets [it] to the lack in the interior of the *ergon*.²

Derrida regarded the frame as a "*parergon*". This Greek word literally translates as "outside the work"; *ergon* translates as "work".

The work lacks something within itself, without which it is not complete, not absolute. It needs something for this to be achieved, an aspect that is not a part of it but without

which it remains indefinite. Just as the painting without a frame lacks something, the nation is also in need of something to make it absolute; and the border makes the nation complete. It also supplies the nation with a convenient, preserved periphery. The border demarcates that which cannot be trespassed; it settles the unsettled, constitutes an assuring mode of closure.

The uncertain border around a country, like the frame of a painting, is a fundamental entity in the process of ascertaining the notion and existence of the country; but at the same time it may jeopardise and alienate the inhabitants, forcing many to become rootless and displaced via transposition to an alien land, and compelling others to become walled-in and territorialised, contained within the periphery.

The polysemy of the border or frontier, and the associated dialectic of a nation's 'surplus' and 'lack', has made it a popular subject among thinkers and artists. Cinema, one of the most powerful art forms, has been generous with its attention to border-related issues. This concern, needless to say, has often churned out obtuse and highly commercialised films based on such themes, which commonly exploit the sentiment and involvement of viewers, incited by the melodramatic spectacle of unfortunate events taking place in the lives of people living near the frontier. Consequently, the significance of the subject is often demeaned.

The oeuvre of films centered on border and frontier themes is not very large; but interestingly, the nations compelled to engage with border crises are not the only ones trying to represent the subject on celluloid. Rather, almost all the notable film industries around the world have taken interest in it. Even at the nascent stage of cinema, such pioneers as D. W. Griffith and his Civil War films (1909-1913) hover around the border theme, showing their concern while not pinning down the subject completely.

Cinema took a little time to produce a finer language for constructing the visual representation of border themes. From the mid-20th century, a few Indian directors have tried to capture this topic on screen; but it is noteworthy that particularly for a country that produces the largest number of films, the sum total of films based on border or frontier themes up till today has been quite insignificant. This discrepancy becomes even more pronounced if one considers the unresolved and disquieting state of affairs around the India-Pakistan and India-Bangladesh border.

One of the catalytic moments in the history of Indian cinematic realism was the release of the Bengali film *Chinnamul* (The Uprooted, 1950). The release of this film is marked as an early attempt to use the border crisis and refugee issue as major themes with a distinctly artistic yet realistic mode of cinematic expression. The director of the film, Nemai Ghosh, (re)constructed the bleak reality of Partition and the wretched condition of the hundreds of thousands of refugees coming to West Bengal across the India-East Pakistan border. This early cinematic probe of the border crisis was intended to be as real as possible, hence a large part of the film was shot on location at Sealdah railway station in Calcutta, swarming with refugees camped under the temporary shelter of the railway station shed. Such

emotively rendered documentation of this exodus is rare, even in the extensive catalogue of Indian cinema.

In 1951, Ritwik Ghatak made his debut film *Nagarik* (The Citizen). Though the film had extensive faults due to Ghatak's initial lack of command over filmic language and his overtly Marxist pedagogy,³ his film was successful in illustrating the predicament allied with the eastern border area. His 'alternative' or 'parallel' language was a binary opposite of the predominant 'Bollywood'/Bombay style(s) of Indian cinema. The formation of East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971 motivated Ghatak to explore, through his films, the cultural identity of Bengal in the midst of these new political divisions and physical boundaries.⁴

Unlike *Chinnamul*, *Nagarik* does not isolate and examine the border crisis, since it is intended as a cinematic critique of the bourgeois-centric transformation of urban Bengali community during the post-Partition era. Ghatak's 1962 film *Subarnarekha* (lit. Golden Line, the name of a river now in Bangladesh) reiterates the violence of diaspora in a more direct manner. In 1947, after a year-long spate of communitarian riots, representatives of the British colonial government, the leaders of Indian National Congress and the Muslim League agreed to divide India on the basis of religion. One outcome of this political formula was the division of Bengal into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and an unprecedented migration of millions of people from their home territories, to resettle in a new land often without a definite and permanent address. With his signature melodramatic panache, Ghatak tried to construct the traumatic experience of this displaced, transversal population. As O' Donnell notes:

In his films, he [Ghatak] tries to convey how Partition struck at the roots of Bengali culture. He seeks to express the nostalgia and yearning that many Bengalis have for their pre-Partition way of life.⁵

The Hindi film industry has come up with a few contemporary renderings – highly commercialised films such as *Gadar* (2001) and *VeerZaara* (2004), based on the theme of the India-Pakistan border, and complete with glitzy, saccharine romantic twists; or films in the pure action genre, loaded with the rhetoric of technicolour patriotism, such as *Border* (1997) and *LoC* (2003).

Gadar, directed by Anil Sharma, is a period romance set against the backdrop of Partition. A Sikh truck driver saves a patrician Muslim belle, Sakina, from a communal riot, and this encounter develops into mutual love and subsequent marriage. After the wedding, the girl comes to know that her father has not died in the riot and he is now the Mayor of Lahore, in Pakistan. Seeking her father out, Sakina arrives in Pakistan unaware that her father, being a staunch Muslim, does not want his daughter to live in India with a non-Muslim husband, and hence will keep her from returning to India. What follows are extended presentations of emotional turmoil, replete with cinematic clichés and eventual reunion with her husband from across the border. Ritualistic elements of the Bollywood formula film dominate the exploration of the theme of border tensions, keeping these as residual rather than core issues.

Similarly, the 'love beyond borders' theme propels *VeerZaara*, that the director Yash Chopra says is his "tribute to the oneness of people on both sides of the border"⁶. The film,

with an impressive star-cast, integrates all the distinctive constituents of a Bollywood film and deliberately eschews making any overtly political statement on the border crisis. Chopra comments, "Though it's a film about cross-border love, there isn't a word of politics in it... It's a very intense, humane and emotional story"⁷.

This predisposition to confine the cinematic exploration of border crises within the standard frame of reference originates in the fundamental nature of the medium, as Hameeduddin Mahmood explains:

Being rootless, and having of necessity to reach everyone, everywhere in India, the Hindi film had to master a technique of its own. It therefore selected the lowest common denominator and made it a standard frame of reference, which is valid even today. The filmmaker can discuss Freud, Marx... class conflict and unemployment, so long as he stays within the perimeter of this frame of reference. Once he goes beyond it he risks loss of comprehension.⁸

Serious analysis of border themes in popular Hindi films may jeopardise that "lowest common denominator"; hence, directors and producers of commercial films judiciously resort to more lyrical renditions of this very challenging and sensitive subject, as was the case with *Veer-Zaara*.

The climax of the film was shot on location at the Wagah border, a road crossing on the western frontier of India and Pakistan, about 35 miles from the city of Lahore on one side of the border and the city of Amritsar on the other. The choice of location underscores the emblematic journey across the border and the tropes of separation, yearning and suffering. The lovers Veer and Zaara literally traverse the conditional political border (shown in close-up shots) to unite within the sublimities of unconditional love. As expected, the film remains a convoluted and distant representation of a border-related tale, a parallel to the mode of the action genre.

One of the most commercially successful and popular films in this regard is undoubtedly *Border* (dir. J.P. Dutta). This centres on the historical battle of Longewala fought in 1971 between India and Pakistan in the Thar desert of Rajasthan, near the border towns of Barmer and Jaisalmer. Highly romanticised, melodramatic accounts of the war and its consequences are sketched in explicitly commercial and popular cinema language, with a liberal dose of gory sacrifice and routine song sequences.

It would be erroneous to presume that only Indian popular films are fundamentally flawed, since it is inherently an aesthetic challenge to render the complicated reality of the frontier region on celluloid via predictable film language. Conversely, if we consider the popular films made in Korea, particularly bearing in mind the tumultuous contemporary scenario of the Korean border region, we will experience a quantitative and qualitative echo of the Indian scenario. *Over The Border* (2006, dir. An Pan Seok), besides having an uncanny thematic homogeneity with *Gadar*, reflects the market-ready package of emotional melodrama involving people torn apart by geo-political borders. Regardless of the topical

plot, the film staggers on through dilapidated cinematic clichés to a formulaic conclusion, plummeting into a whirlpool of farce involving estranged lovers, snivelling reunions and a high-octane drama accompanied by a soundtrack of maudlin songs, catering to the “lowest collective denominator”.

Nonetheless, *Over The Border* can be credited as a more sensible visual interpretation than Korean action films such as *Typhoon* (2005, dir. Kwak Gyeong Taek), *Taegukgi* (2004, dir. Kang Je Gyu) or *Shiri* (1999, dir. Kang Je Gyu),⁹ which add realistic twists to their exploitation of the drama and danger associated with the Korean border provinces, locales often seen as hubs of felony. A review of *Shiri* in the *New York Times* underscores the elemental problem of all these films:

Films like ‘*Shiri*’ are often sold to Hollywood studios to be remade with American stars and without subtitles... ‘*Shiri*’ speaks a universal language – shattering glass hardly needs translation – that is also the native tongue of moviegoers all over the world.¹⁰

Both Indian and Korean filmmakers avoid engaging in sincere discourse about border realities, presumably from predictable anxiety about going beyond the spectator’s comprehension and interest.

Subtler, more poetic yet sensible constructions of the reality of the Indian border region have been rendered by small-budget, little-known filmmakers such as Ashvin Kumar. His film *Little Terrorist* (2004) narrates the story of a 10-year-old Pakistani Muslim boy, Jamal, who while chasing a cricket ball unknowingly crosses the Indo-Pakistan border. The film, nominated for Oscar in 2005 in the best live action short film category, was made on a shoestring budget and underscores the reality of the border area without engaging in vehement diatribe or finger-pointing. Writer-director Ashvin Kumar claims:

I’ve always wanted to make something about the conflict that we are involved in with our neighbour. Something that brought out the ironies about people who speak the same language, wear the same clothes and find themselves pointing nuclear weapons at each other.¹¹

For any evaluation of films based on the border themes, the mythical trilogy on border/border-crossing themes by Greek director Theo Angelopoulos becomes quite relevant. His films – often fairly cryptic, illustrating the disturbing reality of border regions, refugees and uncertainty – hinge on his personal observation of the Balkan War and the division of Yugoslavia. Angelopoulos reinterprets the ideas of nationality and collective discernment through the lens as an exposé of outlandish sectarianism leading to mass migration and ethnic erasure. Schematic motifs such as the expansion of telephone connections in remote frontier regions, rickety bridges or swirling rivers constitute the rhetoric of precarious border regions of Europe.

In *The Suspended Step of The Stork* (1991), the first of the trilogy (the other two are *The Travelling Players*, 1975, and *Ulysses’ Gaze*, 1995) Angelopoulos studies the consequences of synthetically created national-political borders and the politics of exclusion, the residue of

political guile. He conveys the taciturn historical tragedy of people living on the frontier, suffering almost a fugue state of mind. The story is about a reclusive town in one of the remote border areas of Eastern Europe. The townsfolk are refugees and expatriates from different nations; each of them unlawfully traversed the border at some point of their lives. They are waiting to cross the frontier once again to start a new life, but that day never comes; they have been living in this secluded, forgotten town, known as the “waiting room”, for an eternity and a day. As one of the characters in the film says, “We’ve passed the borders but we’re still here. How many frontiers do we have to pass to get home?”

The narrative has a frank political subplot involving a veteran Greek politician who has left his family and a thriving career to live among the refugees of this forgotten frontier town. The film comments on the politics of man-made borders and the plight of the rootless. In one of the mystical sequences, a wedding takes place with the bride and the groom being on the opposite side of a river that marks the national border; it figuratively posits people in limbo, displaced and abandoned – a frequent motif within Angelopoulos’ oeuvre of cinematic rhetoric.

The visual construction of the reality of a geo-political border reaches an iconic status at the conclusion of the film, when the veteran politician, standing on the bridge across the dividing border of the two countries, lifts one leg, in the manner of a stork. His utterance resonates like the moral of a Greek tragedy, “If I take one more step... I am somewhere else... or... I die”.

Borders and frontiers do not only provide a comfortable periphery, necessary for embodying the concept of ‘nation’, but also construct the identity of those living within. The constructed identity of the inhabitants is meticulously contained and defined within the rigorous, juristic framework of the nation. The issue has been represented as a parable in the Hollywood film *The Terminal* (2006, dir. Steven Spielberg), based on the true story of Merhan Karimi-Nasseri, an Iranian compelled to spend more than 20 years at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris because of bureaucratic bedlam. The film shows the unusual events that take place in the life of Viktor Navorski, citizen of a fictional country, Krakozhia. A sudden military insurgency overthrows the government of his country and the status of the nation remains in flux, making his national passport invalid. Gradually, the importance of the nation in conferring or seizing national identity, and how this conferred identity becomes essential for even basic freedoms to be claimed, become apparent. Synecdoche-references of borders as an exercise of hegemonic restraint over freedom of identity in general and the freedom of movement in particular are composed in such sequences where Navorski (played by Tom Hanks) interacts with Frank Dixon (played by Stanley Tucci), standing above a Borders bookstore advertisement. The signifier makes an obvious point; and Dixon’s name may be a reference to the Mason-Dixon Line,¹² a border between the American states of Pennsylvania and Maryland dating back to colonial times, and a symbolic representation of the division between the ‘free states’ and the ‘slave states’ from the Missouri Compromise of 1820 till the end of the American Civil War. The political subtext further reveals itself when Dixon says that Navorski can enter the US only if he says he is

afraid of his own country. But Navorski refuses to be a political refugee, neither acknowledging the fear nor agreeing to separate from his homeland. Even though the film continues to emphasise border issues and the people living in limbo, it also carries the burden of Hollywood histrionics. As an Iranian film critic comments,

Steven Spielberg, who bought Karimi-Nasseri's story, decided to make *The Terminal* with Tom Hanks as a fake immigrant with a fake accent from a fake country, sugarcating and trivialising a growing, global immigration problem.¹³

Glaring inadequacies are also apparent in the cinematic representation of cultural borders. Often, within a nation certain distinct yet marginalised systems of values, norms and beliefs may clash with the homogeneous cultural traits confined within the cultural border, connoting an enclosure that a more dominant culture constructs to protect its own political/cultural supremacy, cultural knowledge and privileges. Many socio-cultural scholars believe that such a border is not merely a geopolitical demarcation: it is an epitome of authority that enforces inclusion and exclusion. The more dominant and hegemonic section will aggressively monitor the border region to keep the border-crossers out. As ethnographer/anthropologist Frederick Erickson explains:

A cultural boundary refers to the presence of some kind of cultural difference. Cultural boundaries are characteristic of all human societies, traditional as well as modern. A border is a social construct that is political in origin. Across a border power is exercised, as in the political border between two nations.¹⁴

The uproar regarding queer-themed films, particularly with prominent gay or lesbian protagonists, may invite a parallel of homophobia with xenophobia. Issues relating to fraught cultural frontiers, depicted in films such as *My Son The Fanatic* (1997), *Hyderabad Blues* (1998), *Such A Long Journey* (1999), *East Is East* (1999), *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *Kantatar* (Barbed Wire, 2006), *Water* (2006), *The Namesake* (2007) etc., may become highly political if viewed as a cinematic critique of marginal spaces occupied by cultural hybrids, who have accumulated distinctly different 'foreign' cultural traits, and therefore are pushed outside the homogeneous prototype of their native cultures; or as a psychological space in which border-crossers are in a dilemma with regard to their bicultural or multicultural identities. As remarked by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, "Human cultures are neither necessarily coherent nor always homogeneous. More often than we usually care to think, our everyday lives are crisscrossed by border zones... of all kinds"¹⁵.

Hence, 'national' cinema has often been accused of "internal colonisation", presenting an incongruous unity and "privileging a limited range of subject positions"¹⁶. The most striking feature of national cinema is that it is a mode of achieving cultural hegemony, and disregards cultural complexities. As film and social history scholar Jyotika Viridi points out in terms very similar to those used by Rosaldo, a coherent national identity is formed through the narrative, which is not only imaginary but also a means of enforcing

marginalisation: "...nationhood and film histories are produced by repressing internal differences among groups crisscrossed by hierarchical relationships – in terms of gender, ethnicity, community, religion and class"¹⁷.

In examining the efficacy of the visual construction of geo-political and cultural borders, it is interesting that irrespective of the country, there have been very few fiction films that can claim an *accurate* interpretation of border zone actualities. Rather, one should look to experimental ventures such as the Border Film Project¹⁸ akin to *Kino Pravda* or the 'cinéma vérité'¹⁹ style, that capture the real truth of marginalised subaltern populations and also give them the postcolonial opportunity of writing back to the centre. The cinematic apparatus empowers the displaced migrants or the marginalised population dwelling near the border by providing them the possibility of communicating "images of personal worlds and their subjective construction"²⁰. This style of filmmaking reinforces the postcolonial critique of cultural/political hegemony. Mainstream cinematic narratives, however, continue to efficiently suppress and conceal the reality of frontier regions, partly from the desire to appease the taste of the "lowest common denominator", and partly due to their homogenising mission as 'national' cinema.

The border/frontier – national, cultural or psychological – is a notion that continually invokes as well as demands consent and loyalty. The cinematic exploration of this theme has rarely been adequate. Rigorous censorship, lack of information about ground realities, and concerns about commercial viability tend to shackle the resolve of directors and producers. If the plight of immigrants, displaced minorities and diasporic populations is to be meaningfully represented and explored, it will necessitate a more flexible, unrestricted and convergent form of cinema, an 'imperfect' *third cinema*, as argued for by filmmakers such as Fernando Solanas and Julio Garcia Espinosa – a cinema of radical, interventionist, truthful 'film acts' aimed at undermining the cultural/political hegemony and neo-colonial status quo²¹ – which will offer an alternative to both mainstream commercial films and art-house cinema.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida. *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (University of Chicago Press, 1987, Chicago), p. 55.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
3. Kironmoy Raha. *Bengali Cinema* (Nandan Publication, 1991), p. 42.
4. Erin O'Donnell. "Woman and Homeland in Ritwik Ghatak's Films". In *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. See <http://www.jumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/ghatak/index.html>
5. *Ibid.*
6. Yash Chopra, quoted in the review of *VeerZaara* by Aakash Gandhi (2005). See <http://www.planetbollywood.com/Film/VeerZaara/>

7. Ibid.
8. Hameeduddin Mahmood. *The Kaleidoscope of Indian Cinema* (Affiliated East West Press Pvt. Ltd., 1974), p. 40.
9. The word *shiri* refers to a fish found in Korean freshwater streams. In one sequence, the film's protagonist expresses how the water from both North and South Korean streams unreservedly blend into each other, and the *shiri* fish swims in this without knowing which stream it originates in.
10. See A. O. Scott's review, "*Shiri* – Balancing Tropical Fish and Mayhem", in *The New York Times* (8 February 2002). For online text, see <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C03E2DB173CF93BA35751C0A9649C8B63>
11. Ashvin Kumar, quoted in Yahoo India News. Posted 4 February 2005. See <http://in.news.yahoo.com/050204/137/2jey7.html>
12. The term 'Mason-Dixon Line' was first used in Congressional debates to indicate the entire boundary between free states and slave states. When slavery began to be abolished within the Commonwealth in 1781, this line became a site of contest: while Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky and Missouri remained slave states until the end of the Civil War, Pennsylvania abolished slavery early on. After the war the line remained as a symbol of the cultural boundary stretching westward from Pennsylvania down the Ohio river and the other bank of the Mississippi to include Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas.
13. Behrouz Saha. "Terminal Blues: Spielberg Film Misses True Immigrant Story Commentary". Pacific News Service, 2004. See http://news.pacificnews.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=fbcbc267ea6f23a9da9617647942174b
14. F. Erikson. "Culture in Society and in Educational Practice". In (eds.) J.A. Banks and C.A.M. Banks, *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives* (Allyn and Bacon, 1997, Boston), p. 32.
15. Renato Rosaldo. Quoted in A. Lugo, "Reflections on Border Theory, Culture and the Nation". In (eds.) D.E. Johnson and S. Michaelson, *Border Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997, Minneapolis), p. 51.
16. Andrew Higson. "The Concept of National Cinema". In *Screen* 30:4, p. 44 (1989).
17. Jyotika Virdi. *The Cinematic Imagination* (Permanent Black, 2003, Delhi), p. 33.
18. Brett Honeycutt, Victoria Criado and Rudy Adler conceived the Border Project to portray the reality of the US-Mexico border region from the viewpoint of illegal immigrants as well as the American Minutemen (who are self-defined on the group's website as "a citizen's vigilance operation monitoring immigration, business and government"). The Border Project distributed hundreds of disposable cameras among both sets of people and asked them to freely take pictures of their day-to-day lives. So far they have obtained over 2000 pictures, revealing what they call "the human face of immigration".
19. Dziga Vertov initiated the concept of Kino Pravda, or 'film truth', through his newsreel series during the 1920s. The intention was to film fragments of actuality which, when pieced together, showed a deeper, hidden truth. Cinéma vérité or 'Cinema of Truth', developed in the 1960s, combines naturalistic techniques with stylised cinematic devices and frequently takes a confrontational perspective toward its topics.
20. Bill Nichols. "Getting to Know You... Knowledge, Power and the Body". In (ed.) M. Renov, *Theorizing Documentary* (Routledge, 1993, New York), p. 174.
21. Murray Smith. "Modernism And the Avant-Gardes". In (eds.) J. Hill and P.C. Gibson, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1998, Oxford/New York) p. 403.