

Post Colonial imagination of Bombay : A cinematic city

Shashank Sameer

Research Scholar Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 20 February 2019

Keywords

Post Colonial, Cinematic City.

ABSTRACT

The growth of urban space and its modern infrastructure has a relationships with the collective social and cultural memory linked to certain sorts of identities within the city. In this Paper, I explore the connections between urban space, memory, infrastructure and time; and I examine how have these issues or concerns have changed with the arrival of modernist enterprise, further giving way to a postmodernist imagination. In order to do so, I rely on theories related to the ideas of anthropology, cybernetics, architecture and the role of the city as an archive. While exploring the idea of city as an archive, I use Sacred Games (NetFlix Tv series, 2018) to explore this idea in its cinematic manifestations. Here, cinema and the city are to be emphasized upon along with the dynamics of the relationship between the two. Also, this undertakes the many aspect of the urban such as, space, infrastructure and archive. Between urban space and infrastructure, this paper grapples with the idea of memory and time situated in modernist and postmodernist paradigms. This paper is divided into three section. First section deals with the idea of places and non places and their role in carving out the spatial and temporal urban space. 2nd part of the paper deals with idea of memory and archive and its amorphous nature. And lastly I explore the Bombay city as an archive with the help of Sacred Games(Netflix Tv Series , 2018) and Kaala(2018, Pa. Ranjith).

Introduction

Modernity paved the way for urbanism and gave rise to city. With Modernity also came the idea of space and time. In order to understand the idea of space and time in modernist sense its crucial that we discuss the notion of places and non places because ideas related to places and non places is at the heart of modern and postmodern configuration of the city. Marc Auge connects this idea of a space with the existence of places and non-places. However First reference of the notion of 'non-places' comes from Marc Auge according to whom non places such as hotels, airports and motorways are fragmented space brought about by the wave of supermodernity . These non places are neither defined as relational or historical, nor is concerned with identity (Augé 1997). On the other hand formulation of the idea of "places" is found in Jean Starbinski concept of base line. It establishes presence of the past in the present with time situated in the background. Modernity often comes handy for the idea of place because it doesn't obliterate ancient places and rhythms completely but rather pushes them into the back ground . Modernity also preserves the temporalities of place as every place has a past, where at one point had a specific meaning to a period of time But as time continued, these places derived a whole new kind of meaning. These meanings also shape the Idea of city. It derives different meaning for different theorist . For James Donald(1999) city and its urban space provides a way of seeing while according to Bruno City creates dynamic, affective and 'emotional' experience (Bruno 2002) . Equally, Roland Barthes' observation of cities and urban spaces is multi-layered it derives its influence from semiotics of space and urban memory.Till now we were discussing about configuration of city according to the notion of places and non places in which we explored the role of modernity in creating

the sensory stimuli on the urban space. However arrival of modernity also brings various types of disease like agoraphobia and claustrophobia(Vidler). As a result of this definition of urban space changes significantly. Now the space is not empty, but full of disturbing objects and hence it inhabits a sort of urban pathology . In order to investigate the urban pathology , discourse of estrangement which is obvious in the writings of Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin is very important. Estrangement was used to understand social conditions produced by modernity for which the psychological interpretation of modern space undertaken and Since modernity created a shock value and psychological sensations therefore according to Simmel a "sensitive and nervous modern person"required a degree of spatial isolation or estrangement as a kind of protection against psychological intrusion. To further substantiate the argument Simmel; In Metropolis and Mental Life(1903) characterized the idea of the stranger who is someone who was not present from the beginning but has stayed after joining a particular spatial group. On the other hand Siegfried Kracauer who, trained as an architect, works on the idea of self distancing from the architectural space in order to escape the estrangement . He quotes example of the hotel lobby space for the understanding of estrangement. Kracauer compared the modern hotel lobby to the traditional church that gives shelter for the transient and disconnected as well as the community of the faithful.

Clips that shows the debate between Modernism and Post modernism with the help of architecture.

Debate on modernity and post modernity can be understood with the help of two films namely Metropolis A film like Metropolis made by Fritz Lang , modernity is expressed through architecture symbolized in its transportation, traffic,

entertainment venues, magnificent buildings, skyscrapers and big gardens. On the other hand Blade Runner idea of city stands at the postmodernity where the physical setting is the setting of the human and cultural trashes and all the left objects like buildings, seats, cars, old cinema halls, ethnic music, ethnic restaurants.

Discourse about Memory and Shifting nature of Archive

2nd Part of my essay works through the idea of mutating memory in the times of digital and cybernetics. To make these connections I use Ideas of Orit Halpern and Wolfgang Iser. Debate about memory has taken a turn towards temporality and medium of representation. With the coming of digital and cybernetics, the debate has reached a point where it is the medium that marks the mode of storage and holds the message (Macluhan). Now Memory is no more static repository but the site of storage for the further circulation and remediation of signals into other media. With changing nature of storage there is also an emergence of new set of archive that in Foucauldian sense is ephemeral to a large extent. Now digital archive which is electronically expressed and digitally articulated in the binary challenges the idea of the traditional 'archive'. And also with the arrival of Open Access Web 2.0 idea of archive is seriously under threat because making and circulation of collective memory can be randomly accessed by anyone. The traditional archive has given way to a more mobile archive of social and collective memory. However a challenge that emerges in the process is of the digital archive becoming limitless and undefined. It is partly because the digital rendering of cultural memory through the materialities of storage becomes too overwhelming and therefore discontinuities between collective memory and technomathematical storage persists in longer run. And since the Memory is a dynamic repository of different media forms that come up every now and then it becomes almost impossible to keep a tab on that. With the changing nature of archive and storage idea of historical time also gets affected. Now Different media forms like audio recording that captures the acoustic signal and codes phonetic speech as symbol. also destabilizes the concept of linear, historical time because a particular sound can be preserved and embedded also with the something that don't belong to a particular period and time.

Post colonial imagination of the city of Hong Kong

In order to understand the connection between city, infrastructure and cinema, a need for mapping the post colonial cities like Bombay and Hong Kong is central. Since both these cities are not alike therefore I use different methods to study Bombay and Hong Kong. I use the politics of disappearance in case of Hong Kong and Charismatic figure in case of Bombay to access the archive of the city. In this paper I use Hong Kong as a case study with focus on the politics of disappearance. Hong Kong with the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 returned to Chinese rule in 1997 it was observed that created a new sort of politics of national legitimacy and as a result of this now the precariousness of this deal lies in the fact that Hong Kong now exists as a mixed or in-between space. Now the positioning of Hong Kong emerges not from the mixed conjunctures of 'East' and 'West', but from the disjunctures of colonialism and globalism (Abbas, 1997). Ackbar Abbas tries to study this precariousness through

the the case study of Hong Kong's architecture and cinema. He argues that there is indeed an important relation between architecture and cinema. Hong Kong whole existence is situated in the culture of disappearance that has given rise to new cultural and political discourse. In this discourse New Hong Kong cinema along with its amorphous architectural space becomes helpful in capturing the idea of colonial space and culture of disappearance. Cinema and architecture allows this exploration and establish the fact that culture of disappearance is linked to the fact that Hong Kong culture is not a fixed entity but holds a fluid identity. A reason for this fluid identity is because culture of disappearance is carved by Cult of ephemeral (Aragon), and speed (Virilio), and a relation between disappearance and abstraction that is implied in Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space (Abbas, 1997).

City as an Archive

In the last section I access Bombay as a cinematic city working as an archive that can be useful for conducting a study of city life and its visual landscape. For this I use Vijayanthi Rao and Ranjani Mazumdar argument about the city space as the source for the mapping visual landscape of city. I also use Charismatic Figure found in the city to access the dense infrastructural network.

These arguments are mediated through Sacred Games, a Netflix TV series Idea of cinematic city like Bombay as an archive can be useful for understanding the relationship of urban space and its architectural depth. Also cinematic form can be helpful in capturing the lived reality according to Ranjani Mazumdar. She argues that the figure of the gangster, the tapani (vagabond/hustler), the marginalized but righteous avenger and the dangerous femme fatale can contribute in mapping of visual archive of the urban in India' (Mazumdar, 2007). Vijayanthi Rao (2009) argues that in the cinematic narrative, the gangster and the terrorist becomes a 'reading principle' through which a chaotic urban space acquires a structure of accessibility. In Sacred Games gangster Ganesh Gaitonde is connected with the global transnational terrorist network to carry out his activities in the cities. In successfully doing that he has the support of Kanta Bai, Badariya brothers, Bunty. He is also connected with transnational terrorist network which works as the network for carrying out his activities in the cities. The central figure in the Sacred Games are full of characters manage the city through networks and they have access to what the elite and to the official does not have. Ganesh Gaitonde in the series is shown to have the access to the information that Bombay city is going to be destroyed because it faces the onslaught of nuclear attack within 25 days. He passes this tip to a police official Named Sartaj Singh. This highlights the fact that gangster figure like Gaitonde has the knowledge of something which is not accessible even to the officials and others. Mazumdar argument about femme fatale who is capable of navigating through the nexus of crime and corruption is also crucial in understanding the other side of city. Cuckoo in Sacred Games is emblematic of the figure of Femme Fatale. Bombay City has the charismatic figure who possess special forms of knowledge, and they are connected to dense networks and navigate through central figures of politicians, gangsters, business tycoons and the everyday hustler. Sacred Games has the Ganesh Gaitonde as the charismatic Figure who is

connected to these figures. An another important intervention comes who argues that modern city is the product of an ongoing process of large-scale urban destruction, carried out under the name of urban planning, and often justified by images of spontaneously grown city parts as unhygienic, disorderly places that spoil the healthy nature and future of the city as a whole. A film like *Kaala* is symbolic of these tussles between the builder and politician figures who stays in planned and sanitized space and the migrant gangster *kaala* who lives in the Dharavi slum that houses masses of urban poor and migrants.

Conclusion

City and cinema forms a symbiotic relationship therefore understanding of city through its architecture and various figures creates a mediated experience for the subject for venturing into the urban life.

References

1. Abbas , Ackbar. "Introduction: Culture in a Space of Disappearance", "Building on Disappearance: Hong Kong Architecture & Colonial Space" chapters 1 & 4 from *Hong Kong: Culture & the Politics of Disappearance* Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 1-15 & 48-90
2. Auge, Marc. *Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* ,Verso, 2009, 7-115
3. Bauman, Zygmunt "A Catalogue of Postmodern Fears" & "The Stranger Revisited – and Revisiting" chapters from *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* Oxford U.K & Cambridge, U.S.A: Blackwell, 1995, 105-138.
4. Blom Hansen, Thomas "Urban Charisma: On Everyday Mythologies in the City" *Critique of Anthropology* 29:5, 2009
5. Easterling, Keller "Introduction" from her book *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* London, New York Verso, 2014.
6. Ernst, Wolfgang "*Electrified Voices: Non-Human Agencies of Socio-Cultural Memory*" from Ina Blom, Trond Lundemo, Eivind Rossaak ed. *Memory in Motion* Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
7. Graham, Stephen "Super-tall and ultra-deep: The cultural politics of the elevator" in *Theory, Culture and Society* Volume: 31 Issue: 7-8, 2014, 239-265
8. Halpern, Orit "*Dreams for Our Perceptual Present: Temporality, Storage and Interactivity in Cybernetics*" *Configurations* Vol. 13, No. 2, spring, 2005, 283-319.
9. Rahul Mehrotra, Rahul "*Bazaar City: A Metaphor for South Asian Urbanism*" in *Kapital & Karma: Recent Positions in Indian Art*: Hatje Cantz., 95-108
10. Rao , Vaijanthi "Embracing Urbanism: The City as Archive". *New Literary History*, Vol. 40, No. 2, spring 2009, 371-383
11. Vidler, Anthony "*Agoraphobia: Psychopathologies of Urban Space*" chapter from *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* MIT Press, 2001, 25-63
12. Vidler, Anthony. "*Spaces of Passage: The Architecture of Estrangement: Simmel, Kracauer, Benjamin*" chapter from *Warped Space: Art, Architecture & Anxiety in Modern Culture* by Cambridge Massachusetts, London England: MIT Press, 2001, 65 – 97