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## Spectacle, Space and the Tragic in the Hindi *Devdas* Films

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to focus on Film Architecture, a spectacle of space, as a stylistic device in the two Hindi *Devdas* films: Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002) and Anurag Kashyap's *Dev D.* (2009) – and its signifiatory role as a vehicle to convey ideas and themes in the narrative.

Both the films are considered as adaptations and remakes of the 1955 version by Bimal Roy, and make huge stylistic departures from it. Bhansali uses a grandiose, over-the-top style while retaining a semblance of the period narrative of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Kashyap, on the other hand, relocates the narrative to contemporary India and replacing rural Bengal with rural Punjab and Calcutta with Delhi. He also employs a style that mixes grunge with psychedelia to portray a certain youth culture and the underbelly of Delhi. Both film makers choose cinematic styles that are self-conscious, memorable and impressive. Both create spectacles using cinematic space, albeit very differently, to convey a heightened sense of the tragic.



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## Introduction

This paper attempts to examine the role of Film Architecture as a functional and stylistic device, specifically in adaptations and remakes. When an iconic film is remade, directors tend to establish an alternative identity by locating the narrative in a different time and place, or by employing a distinguishing visual style. In either case, film architecture or settings perform a vital role. The settings are not merely backdrops for the characters and their actions; they have a narrative function in communicating the story to the viewers. This paper discusses two Hindi films: *Devdas* (2002) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali and *Dev D.* (2009) by Anurag Kashyap. Both are adaptations as well as remakes; both employ a spectacle of space to re-tell a tragic tale.

## The 'Devdas Metaphor'- An Archetype of the Tragic

'Devdas' is a Bengali novella, written by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay in 1917. It has been the subject of approximately thirteen films in India, including four in Hindi language. This is a story of unfulfilled love between Devdas, the eponymous hero, his childhood mate in the village, Paro, and the city courtesan Chandramukhi. Devdas' narcissist self-absorption makes him unable to return the love of either women, leading to his eventual self-destruction through alcoholism. The story has acquired mythic status in Indian popular culture due to multiple re-telling, especially in films, and over the years its principal characters have become archetypes for the tragic.

While in this paper, I discuss Bhansali's and Kashyap's adaptations, I also consider them as remakes of the now canonical *Devdas* (1955) by Bimal Roy. Roy's film played a key role in popularising the myth of the narcissistic, self-destructive hero. Sreejata Guha in the introductory essay to her new English translation, refers to this phenomenon as the 'Devdas metaphor'. She describes it as "... a time honoured, enduring, tragic symbol of unfulfilled love that has captivated the film-going audiences for years" (Guha, 2002, p.V). Several scholars have written about this recurring motif observed in multiple film adaptations. Their observations range from issues of story-telling (Nair, 2002); colonial male subjectivity and masculinity (Arora, 1997); and *Rasa* based analysis of song sequences (Roy, 2003).

This paper focuses on film architecture. It analyses the mise-en-scene of architectural space and its signifiatory role. One of the chief attractions of popular Hindi cinema is its ability to create visual spectacle, to dazzle the viewers with extravagant displays of sets.

One of the ways of for the filmmakers to create a distinct identity for their films is to develop alternative visual styles, this being particularly true of remakes of iconic films. Wilkinson-Weber (2010) has examined stylistic reworking in remakes by focusing on costumes. According to her, costumes play a pivotal role in the re-imagining and re-staging of the remakes to distinguish them from the original. Similarly, architectural imagery created through settings can be exploited in the remakes. I will show in this paper, how the

two remakes of *Devdas* by Bhansali and Kashyap employ a spectacle of space to position themselves in visual distinction from the original by Bimal Roy.

## Semiotics of Spaces in the *Devdas* Remakes

Film architecture is about space as a cinematic construct created either through sets, locations or their combination. Film architecture creates fictional spaces for characters to inhabit and they fulfil a variety of visual and functional roles in the narrative. Pramaggiore & Wallis (2008) have defined the primary functions of film settings to establish time and place, to introduce ideas and themes, and to create specific moods. The visual and spatial characteristics of a setting transmit cultural and emotional messages, evoking responses from the audience.

I argue that cinematic spaces form a network of signs as a sub-system, co-existing with other sub-systems such as costumes, dialogue, choreography and gestures in the larger system of film narration, each with their own narrative and signifiatory role. Set design can either compliment the narrative, or contradict, or overpower it. It can form a system of codes within the narrative or produce tropes or conventions through repeated use. I argue that one of the ways the viewers' consumption of the tragic is mediated in the two films is through the commodity of spectacular spaces. This is revealed when cinematic spaces are analyzed as semiotic signs that carry signification and meaning in the context of the film, referring often to the earlier film and the audience's familiarity with it.

A semiotic analysis of the space-themes as a network of signs highlights the relationship with the narrative in each film. Thematic paradigms are also fore-grounded, conveyed by the space themes within and across films.

The methodology employed has the following steps:

- Narrative structure (synopsis) and space themes
- Analysis of spaces – their denotations and connotations
- Discourse on signification and meaning

## Narrative Structure (synopsis) and Space Themes

Bimal Roy's *Devdas* (1955) is largely a faithful adaptation of Chattopadhyay's novella. The story is situated in the British-colonial Bengal. Its narrative relies on the paradigm of narcissism, and on the binaries of upper class/ lower class and the beloved/ courtesan to unfold the tragedy of doomed love.

Devdas is the younger son of upper-class landed gentry (Thakur) in rural Bengal. Paro, his neighbor and playmate belongs to a lower caste and is of an inferior class. Devdas is sent away as an adolescent to Calcutta for schooling. Upon his return as a young man, childhood attraction is rekindled between the two. In the face of opposition from his family

citing caste/ class differences, he vacillates and rejects Paro's overtures for marriage. Spited by this rejection, Paro's family marries her off to a much older and even richer landlord. A dejected Devdas leaves his ancestral home to return to Calcutta where he starts visiting Chandramukhi's brothel, and takes to drinking heavily. His memory of Paro makes him loathe the courtesan who despite this, falls in love with him and decides to give up her profession. Devdas is consumed by his inability to accept love. In the final stages of his self-destructive alcoholism he undertakes a seemingly aimless cross-country journey, finally ending up outside Paro's marital home to breathe his last. Paro dashes out to see him but her family restrains her, preventing a reunion.

The adaptations by Bhansali and Kashyap are made and viewed in the context of the public memory of Roy's film. Bhansali's *Devdas* follows the same narrative structure, whereas in *Dev D.*, Kashyap relocates to contemporary times, replacing rural Bengal with Rural Punjab and Calcutta with Delhi.

The characters in Kashyap's *Dev D.* are more fleshed out, and exist within the youth culture of early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Chanda (Chandramukhi) even gets a back story. Kashyap portrays the tragedy purely in terms of the narcissistic and self-absorbed Dev (there is no familial opposition or class hatred in this film). Addiction to alcohol and drugs leads him into a deeper morass of his own hollowness. His drunkenness reaches a head when, driving under the influence, he runs over and kills several people. While out on a bail, he goes on an aimless journey to the hills of Northern India. He returns to Delhi (where we expect him) to go outside Paro's home to die. However, in a brief and swift climax, Dev is awakened from his stupor when he himself narrowly escapes being killed by another drunk driver. He comes to his senses, returns to Chanda and sets out with her on a path of rehabilitation.

In the filmic narrative, the principal space-themes are as follows:

- Devdas's family house in the village
- Paro's family house in the village
- Chandramukhi's brothel in the city
- Devdas's rental in the city
- Paro's marital house

The cinematic *mise-en-scene*, articulated by the camerawork, forms a network of signs that denote and connote meanings in the narrative.

### **Cinematic Spaces in *Devdas* (2002), Denotation and Connotation**

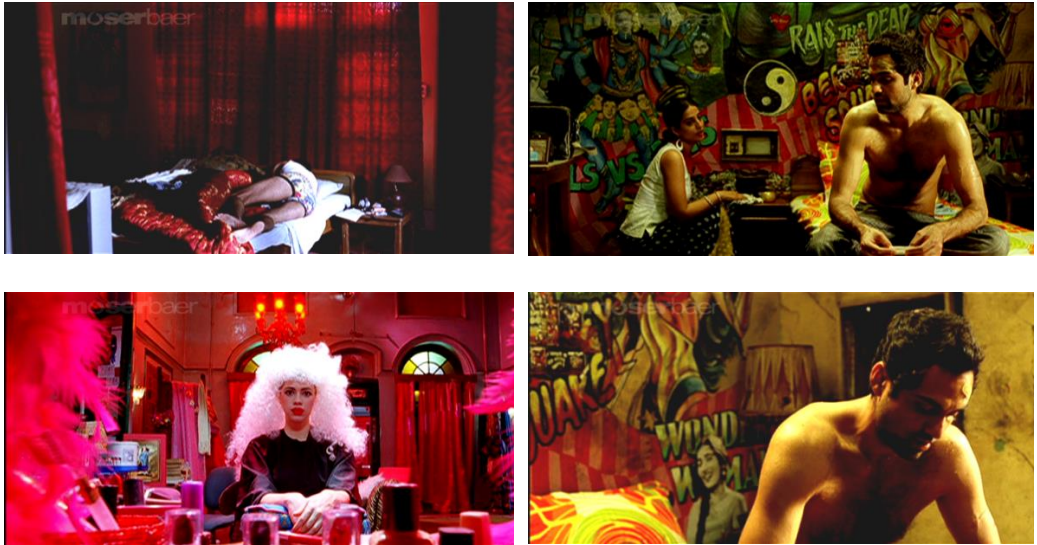
Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002) attempts to dazzle viewers through a spectacle of the grandiose, using extravagant sets in a kitschy mishmash of architectural styles. The spaces inhabited by his characters couldn't be visually more different than those of Roy's film, which was



**Figure 1:** Space themes in Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002): clockwise from top left – Devdas' family home, Paro's family home, Chandramukhi's brothel, Paro's marital home.

influenced by a neo-realist idiom (**Figure 1**). In this remake, Devdas' house is a large neo-classical mansion with grand staircases and vast interior spaces adorned with classical statuary and period furniture. Devdas' own room is voluminous and populated with an array of bric-a-brac. Ironically, Paro's family, which in the novel is of an inferior class, lives in an equally large colonial style bungalow with baroque exteriors and an abundance of stained glass and decorative flooring in the interiors. Paro after being married off to an extremely rich landlord moves to a haveli (very large mansion) of multiple domes and arches like a Mughal palace, with wide corridors, painted murals (inspired by Ajanta) and classical statuary. While these palace-like homes with opulent interior spaces denote wealth and status of upper caste landed gentry, they also carry connotations of *ajayabghars* (museums of curiosity).

When Devdas leaves the village and returns to his student rental in Calcutta, we see him occupy plush and lavishly decorated quarters with connotations of the idle rich. He begins to frequent Chandramukhi's brothel that is set in a dream-like precinct inspired by the ghats of Benares (a Hindu holy city on the banks of river Ganges). The brothel has terraced pavilions and steps along a lake, lit by a million lamps. Her own pavilion stands out with a domed roof and a vast dance hall of carved pillars and brackets, inspired by Dilwara temple architecture. These choices of architectural styles are traditionally denotative of sacred spaces or market-places in holy cities. However, here they also carry connotations of glittering malls of decadence envisaged in the aestheticized brothel.



**Figure 2:** Space Themes in Kashyap's *Dev D*. (2008): clockwise from top – Dev's room in family home, Dev's rental kholi in Delhi, Chanda's brothel room at night.

Bhansali's camerawork is self-conscious of the architectural setting and often employs deliberately skewed viewpoints in order to exaggerate its scale. It also sets up interior perspectives of unending corridors or monumental interiors like Byzantine cathedrals. This results in some shots where two characters in a room converse across vast distances, while the overwhelming scale dwarfs their presence. the camerawork tracks movements and captures extravagance, but without a focus on any detail that may establish a personal relationship with the characters inhabiting the space. This lends a larger than life quality to the domestic space, its purpose well beyond dwelling, its spectacle participating in and enhancing the overwhelmingly melodramatic mode of the narrative.

### **Cinematic Spaces in *Dev D*. (2009), Denotation and Connotation**

In Kashyap's *Dev D*. (2009), the adapted narrative takes place in the contemporary times and the rural and urban homes are portrayed in their natural character. However, the personal spaces of the protagonists are highly stylized to invoke a psychological response from the viewers (**Figure 2**).

Dev and Paro's family houses are situated in a village of Punjab and the camera evocatively captures its rural agricultural landscape. Paro's house is a traditional courtyard house while Dev's family, landed gentry, lives in a house constructed in modern materials. Both houses show chaotic, lived-in interior spaces populated with the paraphernalia of modern domestic life. These spaces connote prosperity and progress in rural Punjab. Paro's marital home is shown briefly, but has little consequence in the narrative.

What stands out in the rural home is Dev's personal room, which is draped in sheer, red hued curtains that swathe the space in ethereal light, here he passes out after a drunken bout. When Dev leaves the village to flee to Delhi, he takes up a rental in an old building in the inner city. This is a grubby little hole – sparse, windowless, dingy and littered with cigarette butts and empty bottles. The walls are covered with grunge themed graffiti. It is here that he slides in the morass of his addiction. The grunginess mirrors the internal, psychological space of the self-absorbed hero. Chanda, the courtesan, lives in a brothel in the inner city. She works nights as an exotic prostitute and attends college in the day. Although the brothel is equally grubby and cramped, Chanda occupies an airy apartment. At night, it is transformed with psychedelic colours and lighting that matches a customer's fantasy.

## Signification and Meaning

Bhansali's adaptation fetishizes lavishly mounted sets, irrespective of their function within the narrative. Mythological or historical Hindi films often employ grandiose sets of palaces to convey the power and wealth of kings. Bhansali uses such monumental scale not for palaces but for domestic spaces. Central to the Devdas tragedy is class difference between Dev's and Paro's families. Bhansali however places them both in large and lavish homes, undermining the binary of upper/ lower classes. The way the brothel is visualized in the film is also interesting. It is made up of signifiers that mix up the domestic with the sacred to convey the carnal. The transformation of Chandramukhi from a courtesan to a state of marriage like domesticity (so effectively conveyed in Roy's version with the transformation of the interior space) is missing in Bhansali's adaptation in which the spaces never let go of their glamour.

The settings in Bhansali's film do not convey a specific time and place except for connoting a vague past-ness through a lack of objects of contemporary life. They indicate neither rural Bengal nor urban Calcutta. All the spaces are worlds unto themselves and unconnected to the world at large. On the contrary, the use of architectural styles and the treatment of interior space (and costumes) reflect a contemporary, globalised, neo-traditional family spectacle of consumption. These globally-aware, wealthy homeowners project their status by appropriating aspirational (classical/ colonial) architecture filled with vast collections of objects d'art. A faux sense of artistic connoisseurship ends up in populating homes as museums of curiosities sans aesthetic appreciation. Ranjini Mazumdar (2007) views such post-liberalization trend as the increasing use of panoramic interiors in Hindi films. She describes this trend as "scenic interiorisation through design with neo-traditionalist nostalgia for family values." (p.117). Bhansali is both influenced by and tries to outdo popular contemporary television soap operas. In that sense, cinematic spaces in *Devdas* make it an adaptation reflective of its own time, although the story indicates colonial era Bengal.

In *Dev D.*, Kashyap's rendering of spaces is varied. We see realistic and intimate depictions of rural Punjab and the inner city of Delhi. Domestic spaces are both lived in and

contextual. In this version, the courtesan leads a double life, conveyed in the differing moods of the same space during day and night. The personal spaces of the protagonist Dev are especially remarkable. Architectural and spatial mise-en-scene is employed to successfully reflect his morbidity and self-absorption. His room in his ancestral village farm house, his rental in old Delhi and his shared space with Chanda- are all heavily stylized and elide into a psychological inner space.

### Architecture as 'star' or 'character'?

Both the *Devdas* remakes of the last decade make huge stylistic departures from Roy's 1955 version. Bhansali uses grandiose, over-the-top settings while paying lip-service to the period narrative. Kashyap, on the other hand, employs a style that mixes grunge with psychedelia to portray a specific youth culture located in the underbelly of Punjab and Delhi. Both film makers choose cinematic styles that are self-conscious, memorable and impressive which set them apart from the original. Both create spectacles using cinematic space, albeit very differently, to convey a heightened sense of the tragic.

Bhansali in *Devdas* (2002) creates an unceasing spatial spectacle of exaggeration and excessive consumption. Creekmur (2007) has commented on the elaborate sets and costumes. She suggests the excessive style has an overpowering effect on the narrative- "This abundance [...] constantly threatens to overwhelm what remains at heart a simple, if psychologically complex story." When the narrative is subordinated to the architect's space, according to Peter Wollen (2002), it gives way to a spectacle whose purpose is to impress and visually dazzle. Such a spectacle makes architecture a 'star' rather than a 'character' according to him. In Hindi cinema, famous actors or super stars are expected to portray their star persona rather than getting under the skin of the characters. This could be true for the settings too.

In Bhansali's *Devdas*, spectacular architecture establishes a set as a 'star', like the other stars in the film. Invoking the star appeal then divests this architecture from a need to perform its narrative function. The official website of the film gives an insight in to the motive driving the set design: "The sets had to be such that the characters had to be lost in the space, yet stand out powerfully." The emotion of tragic is sought to be enhanced by grandeur however, this is subsumed by the externality of architectural excess that undermines the essential narrative paradigm.

One interesting outcome of this 'star appeal' in the film is subversion of the *grihini/tawaif* (housewife/ courtesan) binary, by taking liberty with the source text and infusing yet another element of fantasy in the imagination of their respective spaces. First, the *grihini* Paro visits the *tawaif* Chandramukhi in her brothel, a clear spatial transgression for a woman of her status (where even crossing the threshold is not permitted unless accompanied by male relatives). Second, the *tawaif* is invited by the *grihini* for a religious





ceremony where, in the vast hall of the haveli, the two women dance in tandem, in front of a large gathering of family and common folk – another seemingly impossible transgression. The architectural mise-en-scene of this dance sequence has a remarkable resemblance with the ones in the brothel – soaring space, decorative flooring, multiple chandeliers and diaphanous drapes (**Figure 3**).

Kashyap in *Dev D*. (2009) creates a spectacle of psychological space using grunge themes and psychedelia to connote the inner, personal space of the hero. The space even though spectacular, acts as a 'character', looks inward and characterizes his narcissism. The tragic is conveyed by a spectacle of interiority. Kashyap uses such spectacle as a stylistic means to contemporize the narrative and creates a spatial equivalent for the principal psychological trope of the narrative - narcissist self-absorbed hero, the 'Devdas metaphor'. ■

**Note:** The images are screenshots from respective films taken from official DVDs.

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