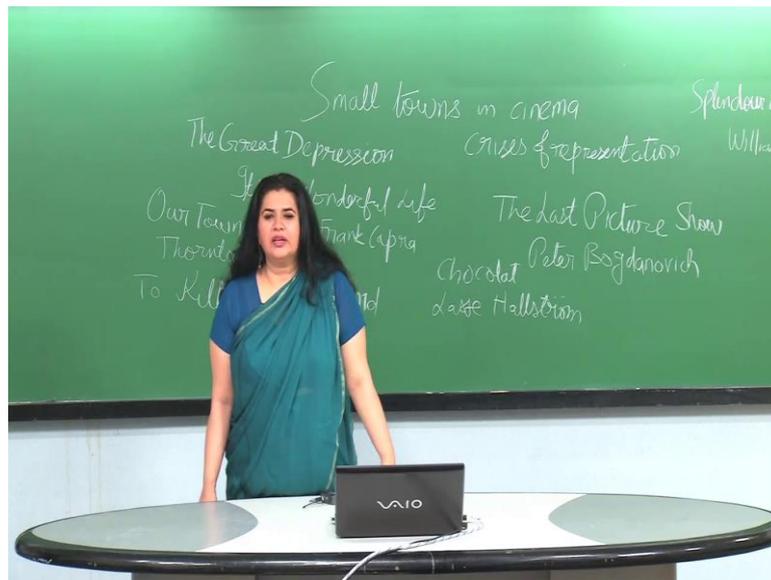


Film Appreciation
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Lecture - 41
Small Towns in Cinema

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Welcome. So, as we reach the end of the course, I thought I will show you, talk to you about something, very interesting and unusual; this is called small towns in cinema; the crisis of representation. Now, you would remember the representation of cities in cinema. We have been talking about that and we particularly, refer to cities with reference to Hindi films. I hope you remember that here I am going to talk about something diametrically, opposite small towns in films. If you remember, the city cinema usually talked about to the early city cinema with a dichotomy, a binary between city and small town in the rural and the country side, right.

Now, small town representation, just like a representation of a city, metro city, big cities, has also undergone the major change; both at home and abroad. So, if you watch film a cinema of small town in Tamil, in Telugu and also, in Hindi films, you will find that there is a certain change that has happened. So, small towns are no longer the towns. The way they were the towns that were represented in the cinema of, let us say, the 70s and 80s; there has been a major shift in representation of small towns in our cinema, as well

as in international cinema. So, my focus today is in representation of a small town in cinema and I am going to particularly, talk about the major shift trends and crisis of representation.

As we know that early American cinema; yes, we are basically going to talk about European and American cinema and how small town was represented here. So, as you know that early American cinema, they portrayed cities as moral, as centers of moral decadence and decay, moral pestilence. Films during the great depression and here, I am talking about the great depression; this was the financial crisis, which is started in 1929 and then, went up till the mid 30's, late 30's in America. That was a time when cinema portrayed small towns as safe heavens so, more or less, an escapist fantasy. So, therefore, when we talk about this small towns in cinemas, especially, American cinema; we will be referring to the great depression; we will be talking about of course, this is a seminal film; It is a *Wonderful Life* by Frank Capra; it is a key text of representation of small town in Hollywood cinema.

There was also a play on which, films were based *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. Now, I said films were base, because there have been a number of films, based on *Our Town*. There has been a television series and also, TV films also, based on Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, which is again, it is all about life in small American town. We will also be talking about *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. I am sure you are aware of this novel by Hopper Lee, which about racism in a small town in America. Then when we talk about shift, we will talk about *Splendor in the Grass* by William Inge, is based on a play by William Inge and directed by the great Elia Kazan. Also the 70's, the American new way film, is a movement when it is started.

So, we had the last picture show by Peter Bogdanovich and then more recently, we had films such as *Pleasant Will* and also, *Chocola* by Lasse Hallstrom; also, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, again by Lasse Hallstroms. So, when we were discussing European cinema, we were talking about film makers from Sweden and we have already referred to Lasse Hallstrom. Today, we will look at two of his major films in Hollywood. During the depression years, small towns were represented as safe heaven or heaven for people. It was more or less, represented to in order to give some kind of respite, some kind of escapism; though it offered escapism for the American public. *All is well with the World*; these films basically, starred people such as Shirley Temple, a child star of that time and another major child actor of that time, Mickey Rooney. So, those were the actors that

pulled in huge crowds. They were enormously successful films. Musicals also became extremely successful. When we are talking about Hollywood musicals, I refer to this element as well that how important musicals of the genres in Hollywood had become when America was going through a major a financial crisis or economic crisis.

So, perhaps, these things are associated; people look for easy entertainment and escapist fare when things are not do well around them. Another major actor or major child star of that period was the great Elizabeth Taylor, who also starred in a number of films, and most popularly, *Lassie Come Home* and *National Velvet*, which was her debut picture. So, all these films are set in a small town during the depression period, and they offered major escape for the film goers. The US depression has been the subject of much analytical critical writing as the country has sort to reevaluate the dump financial as well as emotional catastrophe on its people. The most important novel of that period is *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. There has been a major film, based on the novel, starring Henry Fonda and it was directed by John Ford, one of the greatest films that were made on and about the depression period, and the novel was a 1939 novel.

The US depression is also depicted with very well and that era is depicted in Hopper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, which is set during the depression and deals with racism in a small town America. Now, American small town in films, in American films so, during the depression era as we have been talking about these small towns are safe heavens and a film such as *Our Town* and *Mister Deed's Goes to Washington* and also *The Best Years of our Life*. These films depicted that everything is all right with a world. Andy Hardy's series and this was a popular series of films, starring a major child star of that period, Mickey Rooney. It denied the presence of the depression, which is very interesting that in these films, depression was not even hinted that it was as if these things just don't matter and everything is all right with the world.

Most of these Andy Hardy's series and also films such as *National Velvet* and *Lassie Come Home* and also, the great musicals of the time; they were MGM productions. These were the feel good films set in small towns, which emphasized on old world family values, traditional values and suggested that true happiness lies in community and conformity. This is important to understand that to conform and to be one with rural life, the small town life, is the only way out, because in times of crisis, everyone comes together and help each other out. So, this was portrayed beautifully in a movie called *It is*

a *Wonderful Life*; it is a 1946 movie, directed by Frank Capra and it stars James Stewart and Dona Reed. It was set in post war, a small European town, named Bedford Falls.

It is about the protagonist played by James Stewart; his name is George Bailey. He is a man; he is a regular American guy, who spends his life in helping people out. When he is in financial trouble, he decides to end his life. On Christmas Eve, the entire town prays for even, this is important to note that the community stands beside him. These prayers reach God, who sends an angel to help George Bailey. Bailey is shown a dystopic vision of his community of his town; had he not been born in this through divine intervention, he is made to feel the true worth of his life. He is made to realize that how good he has been for the people. His life is after all, not so worthless. Bailey is told that his town would have turn into a morally corrupt and mercenary place.

So, therefore, there is a reason for him to go on. It is a wonderful life; it is an idyllic; idealize portrayal of small town, rather than a reality. The representation is a collective fantasy of the audience, of the film writers and film goers. Basically, it reinforces the construct of Victorian family values and prescribe gender rules; men are bread winners and women are home makers. The film depicts small town community at its best and it is an all time Christmas movie and ultimate feel good film therefore, the title. By the 60s, there was a major shift in attitudes, towards representation of American small town in films. Films started reflecting disillusionment with a small town, the so called idyllic existence.

The protagonist were shown as miss fits and (refer time: 11:48) with their restrictive surroundings. So, you have to conform too much in your small town environment that was in idea. So, one film of that time, it was not a great success, but still it made a statement. It was *Spengler in the Grass*, Elaya Kazan's and based on William Ingsplay. It is a 1961 film that talks about the repressions of life in a small town and this film was considered a major shift in attitude. Now, here I would like to show you the ending from *Its a Wonderful Life*. In the 70s, and we have been talking about the American new wave. So, the last picture show directed by Peter Bogdanovich, starring (refer time: 12:47) and Cybill Shepherd, is a 1971 film, which was a major success and it is interesting to note the title, or sorry, the tag line of the film. (refer time: 13:02) *Texas*; it is her small town in Texas (refer time: 13:06).

In 1951, nothing much has changed; that means so, the movie is like a period picture, which is a set in the 50s, which are made in 71, but they pick the small town, like in 51 and the idea is nothing much has changed in life. So, setting is a small town called (refer time: 13:26). A scene takes place outside town at the tank, which is a pond that briefly breaks the monotony of the flat premise. The protagonist Sam has taken his friends, fishing there; even though, there is nothing in the tank, but only turtles and that is all right with Sam. He says he doesn't like fish; does not like to clean them; does not like to smell them; he goes fishing for the scenery. So, Sam is the soul of (refer time: 13:57) in Texas. He owns the diner, the pool hall and the royal theater and without those three places, there is no place to go for young people in that town.

So, the film focuses on the loneliness, alienation of the people in a small town. Here is a scene from the last picture shown. So, I will be talking about some films that came in between, but let me introduce you to one of my all time favorite films, representing a small town in America that is Lassy Halfstorm's Whats Gilbert Grape, starring Johnny Depp, Leonardo Dicaprio and Juliette Lewis. Again, it has a very telling tag line. Arnie knows the secret. His big brother Gilbert is the greatest person on the planets. So, the Gilbert is played by Johnny Depp and Arnie is Leonardo Dicaprio. Gilbert lives in a small town called Endora, which is in Iowa state. It is a town so flat and so featureless that there is no energy in the town at all specifically, where Gilbert great family is concerned. The grapes that is the family name; they seem to have been struck in a rut in Endora. Gilbert is around 21 years old. He wants to break free, wants to explore the world, but he cannot, because he has a brother, who is mentally retarded, played superbly by Leonardo Dicaprio and then, he has his mother, who is extremely ill.

He hangs out with other guys at his age, drinking coffee, making a small talk and he has a friend, Bobby Uransa and undertaking business. His mother spends most of her time just sitting on the sofa. His best friend Bobby is an undertaker and he is an apprentice at his dad's humeral parlor and most of the conversation centers on what to do with this street. His boss who runs the local grocery store, is under threat from the big new super markets on the edge of town, which has live lobsters in a tank; something, the people at Endora can't stop reeling about.

So, there is a threat took his livelihood also. The only person who gives him a sort of break, which is not very un happy, but there is a certain kind of a break from monotony, is his clandestine affair with a married women, Misses Karvel. Misses Karvel was played

by Mary Stimberger, who is a very lonely house wife. Now at home, Gilbert oversees his two younger sisters. The house hold runs according to rituals and traditions. Gilbert is more or less, equal to these challenges, in spite of his young age, but he is bored to death. He is absolutely alienated from his surroundings. Now, still the beauty of the film is that in spite of so much of troubles, the family is not depicted as dysfunctional or isolated. Gilbert may have his troubles, but still the community stands by him more or less. In Endora, everybody knows everyone and Gilbert fits in life is possible.

The family, at least, is able to function. Now, here is a beautiful scene from *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*. Oliver Stone's *U Turn*, starring Sean Penn, Jennifer Lopez, Yokin Phoenix and Nick Noalt is another representation of a small town and its moral decades. Now, see this idea was earlier represented in David Lynch's seminal *Blue Velvet*; this is *The Blue Velvete*, in fact, is one of the greatest films that talks about the hypocrisy of a small town, and *U Turn* is another film that takes the whole theme forward. The story in *U Turn* starts with Bobby Cooper played by Shawn Penn, driving somewhere in the middle of the dessert in Arizona on his way to pay the bookies that have already chopped two of his fingers off, because he was too late to pay them.

His car breaks down and the only option that he has is to leave the main road and go to a small dusty town called, the town's name is Superior. So, he meets all kinds of weird people, including a blind native American, a garage owner, a person called t and t, who is always on the verge of explosion. Bobby wants to get out of this town as quickly as possible, but he has no money, because he has been robbed and the mechanic charges him an enormous price for the repairs. He has no choice, but to stay in the town to try to live with these people and to stay out of hands of the bookies, until he has pounds of money. There are extremely; in true Oliver Stone's tradition, there are extremely innovative shorts and the music is by Andrew American, again, which all these things add to the dark mood of the film.

David Lynch's 1986 *Blue Velvet*, starring Dennis Hopper and he is a villain. *Rosaline* is another film that I would heavily recommend. Now, in *Cold Blood*, this is based on Tremont (refer time: 20:21) novel; it is like you know, it comes in the tradition of new journalism, the blend of facts and fiction in itself. The movie was directed by Richard Brooks in 1967. Some films were actually, filmed on location of original events in garden city and Holocomp, Kensas, including the residence of the murdered family. This is about The Clutters, who are mercilessly and meaninglessly, murdered by two drifters.

There were no reasons actually; this was based on a true story on an actual case and true men (refer time: 21:09) decided to ride (refer time: 21:11). So, the film stars Robert Black and Scott Wilson and John Forsyth. The story is set in small town Holocomp in Kansas, which appealed to (refer time: 21:26) as a very embodiment of traditional American ideas.

Now, the dead family the murdered family, The Cutlers; they cannot speak for themselves. So, (refer time: 21:38) information about them was supplied by neighbor's friends and other people, who knew the family. (refer time: 21:46) got most of the information about the preparation of the crime directly, from the murders actually, and thus he shapes reader's opinion about the victims and also, about the criminals. Joel Coen's 1996 *Fargo*, is an extremely entertaining and important film, again, which depicts decadence and decay in a small town, which set in the Scandinavian American upper mid west, where the quoniam actually grow up. The tag line of the film is a home's murder story. The movie has starred, William H Macy, Frances McDormand and Steve Buscemi. It begins with a information that it is based on a true story and ends with a disclaimer that all persons and events are fictitious; that is (refer time: 22:45) play on cinematic language. The usage of the term true story is ironic, and just should be seen as a stylistic device. *Fargo* is a dark comedy of events that is final out of control in the middle of seemingly calm and pleasant landscape of the American mid west.

The movie is today remembered for its stock visuals and the local accents. See, the small towns are always known or any space or locality is known for its accent; the way the people talk and it is captured wonderfully in pathos. It also has arresting long shots of vehicle traversing. There is no blanketed landscape. Overall, there is a sense of quiet Greekness. It is true to the rhythms of a small town life. Also interesting to note in *Fargo* is the expressive use of white outs; sometimes make the characters appear to be moving through a dream; roads appear, disappear. We have already referred to a history of violence by David Cronenberg and the tag line of the movie is everyone has something to hide. It is based on a graphic novel by John Ruggen, who also wrote *Judge Dredd*.

The movie is set in a small Indiana town, where Tom Stall as played by Vego Martinson, one of the friendly little dinars that acts as a the village cross roads and clearing house. He is a regular kind of a person, married to a lawyer and father of two children. He speaks with a middle American accent. Now, these Indiana scenes are so persuasive that we wonder, whether this is a David Cronenberg movie after all or not; that the piece is

very deceptive. Two tuff guys enter they have guns; they threaten the customers and Tom Stall now moves swiftly, take out that two guys and hands up on the local front pages as a hero. This film is more about character and the deceptive illusionary nature of people and places. We are continuously being shown that small towns display disillusionment with love.

These places can be hostile; for example, in *Cold Blood* and *Fargo*. Also, boys don't cry and no country for old men. These places can also be extremely weird as in *Blue Velvet* or may be in *Centers of Corruption*, such as *Erin Brockovich*, which was a 2000 movie. We also see a very disturbing trend; that is small towns always express on conformity as was seen in *Show that is again*, a Lasse Hallstrom movie.

A key feature of a small town films is that it stresses too much of conformity and community life. Everyone knows everyone. Culturally, you have houses, particular places of us for entertainment, but very limited places; they could be a dianor. In fact, there was a movie by Berry Wilson called *Dianor*, which is again about a small town and alienation; although, it is a very fine movie; it is one those feel good films, but then, of course, you have the, you can sense the kind of disillusionment that four young protagonist and dianor are experiencing in their very constrained life. Again, a key feature of small town films is the language and the accents are region specific. They speak in dialects, the local dialects.

Then also, the limited career opportunities and also, limitations to forge relationships; so, this also one of the elements of small town films. Now, in the *True Men Show*, which stands out, because of the way the film is conceived. The conceptual quality of the film is so different from other small town films. It is a Peter Wire film, starring Jim Carry and Add Harris and it is a commentary on a reality show obsessed society. So, it is again a take on nostalgia. We feel about a small town, close net community life. This town, which is a creation of a small town life, is called *Sea Heaven Island Township* and the movie is almost like scripted by its producers.

So, there is a film within film going on. All the inhabitants of the screen of the small town are aware of that they are acting or impact in a movie or in a TV show, except the protagonist that is *True Men*. Well, he is so much controlled by the creators or creators of the show that he is not even allowed to move out of the town. So, his license plate read *Sea Heaven*, a nice place to live. At the begging, we are told about his idyllic childhood

existence, the innocence and self sufficient of a small town and how there is a perfect harmony between family and society in a traditional small town. So, here is a scene from *The True Men Show*. Now, apart from small town films recently, we have also been seeing life in suburbia and suburbia is now better than small towns; that is what these films seem to tell us about. There are the families and the society here are as dysfunctional heaven you or else. So, some of films are *American Beauty*, *Edward Scissor Hands*, *Disturbia*, *Revolutionary Road* and also, watch *Devil's Advocate*, which is sort of an exception, because the hero gets corrupted when he comes in contact with the big city, the New York people, and he finds his moral values again, rather refines his moral values when he returns to his village, to his small town; suburbia life. Now, I would like to talk about *Shokula* also, which is set in a small French village.

It is again directed by Lasse Hallstrom and stars Juliette Binoche, Laynon, Carrien Mocks and Johnny Depp. This is a small town, where life has been the same for, let us say 100 years; nothing is changed and here arrives, Vienna Rocher, a mysterious and enigmatic character, played by Juliette Binoche, who opens a chocolate shop, a chocolate (refer time: 30:32). Now, Vian's effect is extraordinary on the sedate and placid atmosphere of the village. The elderly people define themselves, recalling young love; troubled couples regained their spark and sparing neighbors become happy friends, but Vian's a beautiful life, you know, she beautifully decorates her shop with small lovely objects (refer time: 31:07), candles and it also, arouses something else; the battle between conformity and rebellions.

So, this sparks off moral indignation among certain section of people especially, in the self righteous character as played by Alfred Malina; that is Count The Reynold, who declares Vian as public enemy number one. Here is a scene from *Chocolate*. So, I would like to end the discussion with an Italian movie, 1988 film, *Cinema Paradisa*, which was directed by the Giuseppe Tornatore and it also, won the Oscar for the best foreign picture; a film which is celebrated of the everlasting magic of the movies. The setting is again, a small Italian town in Cecily Genacoldo and in the final years, before the arrival of television. It has to major characters; old man Alfredo, who runs a projection booth. The movie is, at least, the first half of the film is set in a movie theater called cinema paradise, and a young boy Salvatore, who makes the booth, the projection booth his home, away from his family. See, his father was away during the war, and his mother takes care of a little brother. Most of the time, she remains indifferent to him. She has to

struggle a lot to make the ends meet in the person, who is working in the projection room, young Salvatori or Toto as his nick name goes. He finds a surrogate father.

So, the film is like an auto biographical note that the only theater and his home town was when he was growing up and there was; it showed everything from Corasava and to the B grade films of Hercules and Tarzan. In Cinema Paradiso, this was that was the first place he had got glimpses of Charlie Chaplin, John Wayne and countless Hollywood melodrama. So, the film is a remainder of scenes in true past days and nights, where the young boys still supporter of citizen came and it is a homage to all the great films ever main. The message of the films seems to be that the power of the screen can compensate for a deprived life. The Town Square in Cinema Paradiso here, plays major role.

It is a character by itself; it is a community, where the people come together offer advice and again, it is a kind of, you know, nostalgic view of a life that is never going to come back again. The film is essentially, about the reminiscence of a boy growing up in a small town. Small towns have also found a major place in contemporary Hindi films also, such as Welcome to Sajjanpur, Manorama, Six Feet Under, Ishkia and Dabbang. So, there is a lot of research that is waiting to happen or representation of small town in cinema. Stylistically, too it offers a lot, because there are open spaces. Film makers can also use the local dialect and the local way of life so, very interesting area of study; small town and its representation.

Thank you very much.