

CINEMATOGRAPHY ART

a quarterly Magazine

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When a stone is cast into a pool, ripples spread all around with an intensity depending upon the force with which the stone is cast. The extent of ripples, however, is always subject to the size of the pool. 'Highway', indeed, is a stone cast into the film world with a highly forceful intensity as it could create ripples as far as Berlin. The extent of ripples, however, varies in accordance with the size of the pool of our consciousness. So some would interpret the movie in terms of Stockholm syndrome, the others might call it a road movie with a difference, and still others could regard it as a sojourn that starts with a bang but ends with a whimper.

Our movie-viewing sensibilities have, indeed, been so fed upon linear progression of stories that the only scope of novelty left with the writers or directors is either a startling flashback or an exciting dream sequence. Our critical abilities too have been shaped in terms of either the theme or its aesthetic treatment. However, in 'Highway', when our itching urge for that linear progression gets no soothing relief even from the flashes of a distressing past or the dreams of a pleasant future, we get restless. The theme too tends to become quite elusive since not even the protagonists themselves are sure where they are heading to. The restlessness tends to develop into frustration. The only way left with most viewers is to wish the movie had said something more than it actually did.

And this is exactly the temptation we must not succumb to since doing so would be a grave injustice to its maker Imtiaz Ali with whom -- as he himself told -- the story continued brewing in mind for no less than fifteen years and could not get any final shape till the finish was actually reached and executed.

It is because it is a movie playing with symbols, and the symbols here are not static but dynamic, building up associatively to present a contrast between the artificial life we are accustomed to leading and the natural life we are capable of leading. This contrast starts symbolically with the cramped in side of a house preparing for the ceremony of tying a young girl in the shackles of nuptial tradition. But the bride having an element of a deep seated resentment against cultural ties feels so suffocated that she begins to yearn for some fresh air. The way she comes out of the car and stretches out her hands to embrace the open air is suggestive of her latent wish to be one with nature. But she is too innocent to know that a petrol pump is not a benign lap of nature but a natural habitat for malignant elements.

Right from the moment of Alia Bhatt's abduction, the movie goes on demolishing the edifice of so called civilization that we have built with the mortar of hypocrisy and the bricks of compromises, even immoral and forced at times. Simultaneously, the movie goes on building up a case for realizing our innate natural self that needs a painful soul-searching and a bold stance challenging conventions.

This journey from outer to inner self has been graphically traced on a highway that takes us away from the halogen light of towns to the sun-lit snowy peaks of mountains. The pangs of journey are symbolically and aesthetically described through the sad tales both the protagonists had to tell. The girl looking sweet and chocolaty from outside has an inner bitterness and hardness supposedly cured by pills of gagging relational ties. The boy looking hard and strong from outside has quite a soft and fragile interior preserved in some sweet and shocking mother images. Both of them have encounters with their real inner selves and are carried away off feet by the freshness and strangeness of this vision. The rest of the movie is about their inner preparation to welcome and accept their inner natural selves. But the outside is also prepared to smother and crush any such threat or challenge to its existence.

The focus is more on the inner progression than the outward happenings. And therein Imtiaz Ali has taken a risk that only the likes of V. Shantaram and Guru Dutt had the courage and acumen to take. Mr. Ali's team deserves all praise and credit for projecting his vision so aesthetically and successfully. The foremost contribution has been made by the cinematographer Mr. Anil Mehta whose visuals not only enhance the director's vision but also add substance and meaning to it. Alia Bhatt and Randeep Hooda have quite artistically revealed the innerness of this vision with their perfect performances. A. R. Rahman and Irshad Kamil have lived up to their unsullied reputation. But still the 'guddi-patakha' song sung by Nooran sisters Sultana and Jyoti has a charm of its own and even the briefest summary of 'Highway' deserves a special mention of this unique experiment made by the film-makers.

Anything deleted from or added to this unprecedented movie might disturb the precarious balance the director has achieved and maintained so dexterously and adroitly by perhaps refusing to budge even an inch from his conviction in his own vision and artistry.

- **Dr. Madhu Bhushan Sharma**, is script writer. (madhubhushan.sharma@gmail.com)

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A photograph of Anil Mehta, a man with a mustache, wearing a green bucket hat and a grey vest over a white shirt. He is smiling and looking through the viewfinder of a large professional video camera. The camera has a large lens and various attachments. The background is a bright, slightly cloudy sky.

Anil Mehta on Shooting Highway

Anil Mehta is a much sought after DOP in both Advertising and Bollywood. After doing graduation from Hindu College, Delhi University, he took his diploma in cinematography from FTII, Pune in 1984. His scintillating talent behind the camera has been coming to the fore with movies like Lagaan, Jab Tak Hai Jaan, Veer Zara, Cocktail and Wake up Sid.

Anil Mehta was an established DOP in Advertising much before he Starting as DOP in bollywood with Khamoshi : The Musical in 1994. He beautifully transcribed into images the scripts of Straight from the Heart, Agniversha : The Fire and the Rain, Saathiya, Kal Ho Na Ho, Marigold, Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna and Rockstar.

During the last two decades he has indeed been on the "Highway" of glory and fame in the world of indian cinematography, winning on the way Screen Weekly Award, IIFA and the National Film Award for Best Cinematography for his work in 'Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam', Screen Weekly Award for 'Khamoshi' and 'Lagaan' besides being nominated for the Screen Weekly Award for 'Kal Ho Na Ho' and 'Veer-Zaara'. He has worked with top art-house Directors like Mani Kaul (Cloud Door - International Series of erotic tales) as well as the most impressive names of commercial cinema like Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Ashutosh Gavarikar, Karan Johar, Yash Chopra and Imtiaz Ali. At present he is also taking care as the President of Western India Cinematographers Association and Reviving the Organization.

As all the masters liberally bequeath their legacy to the coming generations, so did the Anil Mehta . He has contributed generously to the growth of Indian cinematography by passing on his tremendous experience and fabulous expertise to cinematographers like, K.U. Mohanan, Amitabha Singh, Anil Chandel, Guru Raj , Setu, Rafe Mahmood and many more who themselves are now very respectable and established names as independent cinematographers of today's Bollywood.

In this interview Naresh Sharma engages Anil Mehta into a stimulating discussion on the cinematography-aspects of his most recent work " Highway " directed by Imtiaz Ali for whom he has already shot Rockstar. HIGHWAY was in the official selection of the Berlin International Film Festival 2014 for " Panorama Programme" having Wieland Speck as its curator. The selection of films is made to provide insights on new directors in art house cinema and Auteur Films. In this section one finds new discoveries and films by renowned directors like Pedro Almodóvar, Jacques Doillon , Mika Kaurismäki and Chantal Akerman .

The DOP always helps the Director in the realization of his vision. What kind of locations came to your mind regarding that vision when Imtiaz narrated the Script to you and how did you go about choosing the locations?

To begin with Imtiaz narrated only the idea, not the script, he was still working on it. Straight away it was very clear to me that this film was going to be unusual places. It's a kidnap story that starts in Delhi. So in a sense it's a story that has to stay off the Highway. Locations were first plotted on a map in Imtiaz's office, what route would the kidnappers take. Imtiaz's long time Associate, Rajesh Tibrewal then went on the first recce by himself.

My chat with him before he left was 'don't think logistics, find places that 'smell' right for the movie, let's push ourselves and production.' We were more interested in what is true for the film. The Salt Factory, near Sambar, where she is kept captive is not a very friendly place-there are no hotels nearby and you have to travel one and a half hour to the nearest hotel, but we were not concerned about all these things.

The spirit of the film determined the locations. We trekked 45 minutes from Aru in Pahalgam to reach the village location for the climax.

In the upper Himachal the roads and hotels had not yet opened for tourism, we shot in towns like Reckong Peo, Nako, Kaza.

It was -5 degrees one night in a hotel in Kaza, without electricity and water.

Imtiaz likes to shoot his films in script sequence and he is very loyal to real locations. That sets a tone for the film.

What was your basic approach to cinematography in "Highway" ?

I approached Highway with an 'Indie' spirit. Minimal Gear, Shoot from the hip, Keep it simple...

When we finished shooting in Delhi, Haryana and Rajasthan I shed all the big lights, because everything from thereon was day exterior. There was some night scenes in Punjab and Kashmir but I kept stripping down the kit. For the climax we were down



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What I found really good about Sony F-65 was, it's color rendition in our conditions, our skin tones, the kind of landscape, the kind of light we deal with and the wide palette of colors in our frames.

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to a portable generator, some household fixtures and polyboards. A lot of the film is shot handheld and available light.

On certain occasions one happens to see wall graffiti in the foreground, say when the Truck is going away in the frame. Was it the result of conscious efforts to bring out the local area feeling or it just happened?

Following the Graffiti on the walls for changing areas and changing languages was one of the motifs that Imtiaz had in mind. Another motif was electric poles. Every time we'd see a set of electric poles and electric cables or for that matter communication cables like telephone cables, we would be doing tracking, passing shots with them. The cables and poles did not make the final cut.

Since most of the time in the film the shots are being taken while the truck is moving, in such a situation what were the rigging plans for the camera ?

We knew that the TATA 407 was going a large part of the middle section of the film, a lot of scenes were going to be set within it. It had me worried initially, because Imtiaz wanted a very generic cabin at the back, like a metal container.

Gradually after much discussion between Sumit Basu, the Production Designer, Imtiaz and me we arrived at the truck that now features in the film.

Production bought a brand new vehicle and every single detail on the truck is put in there by the Art team. The other big aspect was shooting the truck from the outside, again no fancy gear, No tracking vehicles



with jimmy jib, no low loaders, no gyro stabilisers, just some pipes, clamps and ratchet straps..

We got in Arjun Bhurji as key grip and he designed and fabricated platforms on 3 sides of the cabin. I could ride all of them

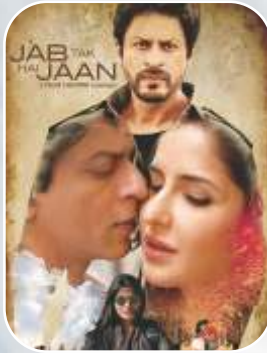
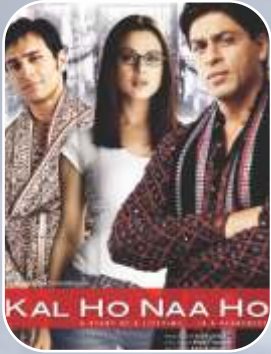
with camera and director tucked in. There were times when Imtiaz and I would be just sitting along and I would be shooting by looking through camera. We wanted that kind of flexibility rather than the locked off camera feel. But because we were not shooting locked down roads, we often had hard rigs on the body of the 407.

We also did a lot of parallel tracking stuff from another vehicle, again Vibration Isolator on a Innova or Eeco or a small pick up with an open back, whatever we could get. We lived precariously sometimes.

Most of the night sequences having long shots in the outdoor are lit up very realistically as if it were lit by real moon only . How did you plan the lighting scheme for these sequences?

Night lighting in exterior in the open fields was another of the major concerns for me. The sensitivity of the Digital cameras in low light conditions was very useful. I rated the SONY F-65 at 800 ISO. Again the lighting schemes were simple.





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We used two units of 12 bank Dinos just giving a one sided wash across the entire filed. Maybe there was one 2k or 4k soft box as a fill but I did not complicate the lighting beyond that. In the petrol pump I just ensured that all the Practicals were working. In the torch lit scenes the torches lit the scene. In the exterior of the salt factory, I got the Art Dept. to buy a Sodium Vapour Fixture, it's in the frame and it lights up the entire shot. A tube light here a naked bulb there, that was the philosophy. Alia's free run in the salt pans is Day for Night. It took a lot of time for the VFX team to get the "day for night" effect to look right. I don't think we cracked it fully, but I do know that it was very hard work. The fact that we had 5D mixed in will all that motion blur.. did not help.

How did you light up sequence of Alia inside the Tata 407, where there is no direct/indirect penetration of the sun light in any obvious manner?

I have to give credit to Sumit and his team here. The phatta/boards at the rear allowed me some fill at times,

The 3" perforated strip along the length of the metal body turned out to be a great lighting solution. Small improvisations went a long way. Sensitivity of the camera and lenses helped a lot.

What were the other occasions where the Production Designer was of great help in achieving your lighting plans?

On a location based film the Production Designer is still a very useful person. For instance in the Salt Factory where Alia Bhatt is held in the night, there the entire space on the top where she sleeps and wakes up the next morning looks like part of the factory but actually it was all dressed by the Production Designer. When we went there, there was nothing but pigeon shit. All the Industrial debris was brought there by the Art team. I got them to fix in the practicals where I thought they would be useful. In the Dhaba sequence, where Alia has a meltdown, I told the art guys to erect a street lamp pole with a tube light.

Which camera and set of lenses did you use for shooting 'Highway' and any specific reason for choosing the particular model?

Sony F-65 was just out and couple of feature films were already shot on it. I had the opportunity to test it and found it quite faithful at 800 ISO. What I found really good about it was, it's color rendition. I feel in our conditions, our skin tones, the kind of landscape, the kind of light we deal with and the wide palette of colors in our frames, I thought it would help. I chose the Master Primes primarily for sharpness and speed. Our Projection quality takes care of the rest.

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