

*Tribute to Buddhadeb Dasgupta***K M Baharul Islam****Buddhadeb Dasgupta's 'The Voyeurs' (2007)
Treatment of the Private Space**

Buddhadeb Dasgupta (1944-2021) is perhaps one of the most iconic filmmakers of modern India who presented a unique blend of poetry, filmmaking, and social realism in recent times. In his demise, we are bound to look at his entire body of work from different perspectives, and for years to come, his works are going to be part of our film academia. While his major award-winning works will, of course, attract much of the attention, debate, appreciation, and eulogies alike, a true tribute to the late poet-filmmaker would surely reappraise each of his works with renewed interest beyond the temporal responses of the audience and critics at the time of their release. Suppose you want to look into the sincerity, dedication, and honesty in someone's work. In that case, you should not look for his big projects but focus on the apparently unassuming ones hidden from the popular limelight. It is in minute re-appreciation of Dasgupta's understated films that we can truly see the filmmaker delving

deep into an otherwise calm world and succinctly making his point interwoven between characters and stories he told.

The world is increasingly accepting the omnipresent surveillance of the state in a different form, with diverse sets of justifications accompanying them. The mass deployment of hidden and not so hidden cameras for the 'safety and security of people, combined with the advent of Artificial Intelligence and convergence of technologies, brings home the Orwellian world that we live in. Snowden's WikiLeaks startles us but momentarily as we continue to enjoy the pseudo-security offered by the public authorities and private corporations who are capturing, processing, and at times manipulating our private lives. Mass surveillance is the new tool of power rooted in the primal desire for voyeurism to invade others' private spaces. It will be interesting to see how Dasgupta touched this theme and broached the issues around

surveillance, voyeurism, private space, and their consequences in his film *The Voyeurs* (2007) [Bengali: *Ami, Yasin Ar Amar Madhubala*]. It will not be out of place here to bring another film *Rear Window* (1954) by Alfred Hitchcock, to the discussion to focus on the camera as an artist's tool that has now been usurped by the state (Corber, 1992). Through this discussion, we present our tribute to Buddhadeb Dasgupta, who, we argue, has added a nuanced variation to surveillance cinema as a narrative at the intersection of technology, society, and politics (Zimmer, 2011).



Poet of Unease

The Voyeurs starts with a stark reality of the public healthcare system – where rats infiltrate the hospital and counter the reality (unhygienic condition of the hospital), CCTV (closed-circuit television) technology as authorities try to subvert the reality and the public eyes by installing cameras. Dilip, a small-time computer technician, and his friend Yasin get the job. They both come from difficult situations back home as we are shown the predicaments of Yasin back home. Yasin, to find work and support his family comes to Kolkata to join Dilip. As we see Dilip and Yasin going about their work and making some progress in their vocational lives, we are hinted at the dark sides of technology misuse and abuse - a husband trying to watch over his wife or the railway station security staff watching over an unsuspecting couple trying to kiss – all these disrupt the easy acceptance of CCTV camera as a normal corollary to modern life. Next, we see that the beautiful, aspiring to be actor, Rekha enters the scene when she comes to live next door. Her resemblance (at appears to Yassin) to Madhubala (a star of yesteryears from

Hindi cinema), whom Dilip idolises, brings in the romance angle to an otherwise lonely life of Dilip. However, this spiritual kind of love interest is disturbed by the action of Dilip, who is getting an opportunity to enter Rekha's house installs a CCTV camera in her room. He and Yasin watch her sitting in their room and seemingly unmindful of the ethical-moral issues around the invasion of another person's privacy. Yasin prompts Dilip to propose to her as normal people do. But, the situation goes out of control when Rekha discovers the hidden camera and informs the police. While running away from the police, both Dilip and Yasin are caught in another ongoing hunt for a terrorist, which hints at the state's underlying justification to watch over people's private space. Police mistook Yasin for the terrorist and shoot him dead. When confronted with this mishap, a top official draws analogies of blood smears that one gets while killing a mosquito. This negation of people's lives to nothingness and the derogatory attitude is the post-truth. This will reverberate much louder in later years when a riot victim is equated to a puppy accidentally coming under the car by a top politician in India (Rehman, 2020). Dasgupta blends voyeurism of individuals and the state in the film but resists any closure or tries to give an easy answer but sounds out loud about the evil, gloom, uncertainties, opacities, and fears that a 'wired' world presents to its denizens today.

Dasgupta often used his lyricism to disrupt our commonplace understanding of the reality around us. In a way, he was a filmmaker-poet in unease. When the characters' seeming calm lives are disturbed in a turn of events, the images present new realities and the fear of the unknown. Sitting in the audience, our vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and (painful) memories from the past are all lurk in the dark when the film unfolds a narrative. This iterative experience is unique in watching Dasgupta's films as we go back and forth in a way to co-create the story in our minds. For example, in *The Voyeurs*, while we are almost getting comfortable with the lives of Dilip and Yasin – who are watching their next-door neighbour through a hidden camera – because Dilip refuses to see her undress. His hesitance to go beyond a point to watch someone's private activities,

love, and longings for love all help us mitigate the moral, ethical and legal dilemma that prowls beneath. Dasgupta transforms the apparent certainty and transcends the visuals into an anomalous territory that we fear to tread. Dasgupta's cinema is anchored in such poetic anomalies that are full of "uneasy people and unsettling situations" that keep us "swinging between the real, unreal, surreal" (Gupta, 2021).

Loneliness and *The Voyeurs*

Voyeurism draws from a diverse set of fields like cultural psychiatry, psychopathology, and film studies. It is perhaps one of the controversial subjects that permeates law, politics, technology, human rights, and mental health. Voyeurism has travelled beyond the carnal desires of sex and covers a much broader implication of watching other people's private lives (Stanyer and Wring, 2004). Often it stems from the loneliness of individuals embroiled in their world or of states detached from its citizens and tries to peep into the lives of others from their cocoons. It is interesting to note that Dasgupta's films often focus on the issue of loneliness, and perhaps it is a subject that is deep-rooted in his cinema, as he says in an interview:

"Images of my childhood are linked to my adult life and to my cinema. The family was always on the move. The houses where we lived were so thickly crowded that I never had the chance of being alone with myself. My association with literature, music and painting pushed me into the realm of loneliness. This was painful at times but has also been creative in many ways...Sometimes, wandering from one room to another was more than taking a journey, while flying from one country to another was not. The most important thing is to be able to relate to these — journeys and loneliness, and to try and discover how you respond to them. I can neither write nor make films without these two essential elements of my life. At times, they appear allegorical, but they are real, believe me. (Chatterjee, 2008)."

In *The Voyeurs*, Dilip tries to take that journey from one to another in a strange way — through the hidden camera in the next room — into

the life of his love interest. Is it a normal escapade for the lonely individual or a desperate attempt to alter the reality just as the hospital superintendent tries to hide the root cause of the infestation in his ward by watching over the rats through CCTV? Unable to control the origins of the issues of terrorism, the safety and security are reduced to triviality by the state that offers a simplistic solution — watch over the people. Dasgupta succinctly indicates this paltriness in showing the security staff in the railway station deriving asinine pleasure from watching the closeness of a couple. Dasgupta's cinema often dissects the world around us and brings forth issues of serious concern to the forefront. The process triggers our mind about the complexities of human nature, moral dilemmas, and ethical dialectics.



When we discuss the questions of voyeurism and privacy in Dasgupta's *The Voyeurs*, we can't help recalling another much-acclaimed film on this subject - Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). Films are made almost half-century apart from each other, but many common grounds concerning voyeurism and obsession. Psychologists define voyeurism "as having intense sexual arousal from observing a person who is naked, engaging in sexual activity, or the process of disrobing" (Bhugra, 2020). The character of photographer L. B. 'Jeff' Jefferies, like Dilip, is alone. Jeff is recovering from a broken leg, and from the rear window of his apartment, he watches his neighbours through his binoculars and telephoto lens. In the original story (written by Cornell Woolrich), Jeff is also an unemployed person, much like Dilip and Yasin. Still, Hitchcock gives him a vocation of a professional photographer just as Dasgupta shows his characters as techies.

Jeff's relationship with his girlfriend Lisa is as romantic but unfruitful as that of Dilip and Rekha. Hitchcock also alludes to the voyeurism of the state when a helicopter hovers over the sunbathing women on the roof, and we see a similar indication in the railway station scene in *The Voyeurs*.

An interesting perspective in both films is participatory voyeurism. As the audience, we watch the scenes from our home confinements or a cinema hall instance akin to suspension of disbelief. In a building that participates, Dasgupta trickles the voyeuristic tendencies in human nature. Some researchers found that as much as "65 percent of males had done actual peeping" (Freedman and Kaplan, 1967), voyeurism is a much larger cultural issue beyond the boundaries of psychiatry. Pathological voyeurism is now engulfed by a much larger late-twentieth-century advent of a sociological tendency reflected in our entertainment products like reality shows (Metzl, 2004). *Big Brother* of reality television programmes now overshadows Orwell's big brother. Dasgupta's *The Voyeurs* takes this issue at a much deeper level on two counts – voyeur as an unintended corollary to modern life (Bodford, 2017) and voyeuristic surveillance by the state (Rothenberg, 2000). Dasgupta presents a nuanced picture of social isolation in Dilip and Yasin's lives alone in the urban crowd, attached to home in Bahrapur and yet trying to negotiate their loneliness through the hidden camera. Like Jeff, Dilip is also struggling with love questions and trying to take an illusory escape from the realities of life through voyeuristic means (Stam and Pearson, 2009).



Hitchcock's treatment of voyeurism is soaked in the spectacle that the audience is made a

part of the "mixture of passivity, emotional complicity, and the gratification of potent dream-desires" (Toles, 1989). The audience is so soaked in the process of 'finding out, true to the thrillers made by the master filmmaker, that they forget to excuse themselves out of it. The audience is a 'gullible' accomplice for the filmmaker, and they seem to enjoy the quandaries of others built within the plot (Brooks, 1984). Dasgupta successfully avoids this predicament in this film by bringing in many humane elements woven around both Dilip and Yasin – be it Yasin's humble background and his situation in the family or Dilip's interactions with the imaginary Bula-di. The audience is not manufactured to follow the strong emotional undercurrents in the lives of the characters; they follow them intrinsically. Even the situation of aspiring actor Rekha, who tries hard to enter the Bengali film industry, is laced with realism that the audience can easily appreciate. At the same time, the audience will also decipher the satire that Dasgupta is playing on the Bengali film industry itself. In these respects, it can be argued that Dasgupta's *The Voyeurs* stand far apart from *The Rear Window*, perhaps as far as the years between their making.

Politics of Surveillance

Dasgupta introduces the idea, execution, and the implications of voyeurism as a culture of surveillance in his film *The Voyeurs* from the very beginning. The idea that the authorities can watch the rats or the nurses in action and improve the condition of a hospital is comical and a critique of the modern surveillance state. Cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han (2017) describes the neoliberal state as a technology-driven regime that has tasted fruits of mind control. In this 'neoliberal psychopolitics', our privacy, freedom, opinion, information are all controlled substances and are exploited only in a prescribed manner to retain power in authorities. The proliferation of communication technologies in a networked world is a tool that the state would not like Dilip to employ. Dasgupta presents this confrontation in *The Voyeurs* when Rekha reports discovering a hidden camera to the police. In a very simple routine scene where

police examine the room and put a guard to wait for Dilip and Yasin to return, the filmmaker, in his paradigmatic style, shows the private space (of Rekha) now being open to authorities. This takes us back to Han, who talks about the smart power of the neoliberal state that works quietly. In his words –

“Neoliberalism represents a highly efficient, indeed an intelligent, system for exploiting freedom. Everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty – emotion, play and communication – comes to be exploited. It is inefficient to exploit people against their will. Allo-exploitation yields scant returns. Only when freedom is exploited are returns maximized” (Han, 2017).



Dasgupta's *The Voyeurs* introduces state surveillance in a very subtle way in contrast to what is popularly known as surveillance movies, the number of which is increasing manifold every year to deserve a separate category perhaps altogether soon. He doesn't leverage the power of smart technologies to offer a glamourised peep into the world of state superpower or corporate snooping. He rather nudges us towards a bigger issue of privacy as an eternal element of love that entails a desire at another person's private space. Dilip switches off the monitor before Rekha undresses on the other side as he feels only love can make one feel to see that. The interwoven scenes of his interaction with an imaginary agony aunt from the AIDS helpline – Bula-di – reinforces this idea of love as a right of the way into other's territory. The state or its representative in the film, the hospital super, or the police do not have that leverage; rather, they use the state's power to invade our privacies. The emerging nature of our 'democracies' skulks through the scenes. We were made aware of the surveillance

environment we live in. It is a precursor to what Jon Fisman (2019) writes years later in *The World in 2020*:

“For years, the rollout of surveillance technology around the world, whether under dictatorship or democracy, followed a drearily predictable pattern. Whatever security forces said they needed, they tended to get. As a result, police in liberal countries now have a host of tools at their disposal. As well as facial-recognition systems, they have cameras mounted on police cars or telephone poles that recognise and record the licence plate of every passing vehicle; and Stingrays, which mimic mobile-phone towers and let police intercept data from every passing phone, including texts, websites visited and the phone numbers of incoming and outgoing calls. All these gadgets allow the police to build detailed portraits of people's lives.”

In Dasgupta's *The Voyeurs*, the presentation of private space and its technology-mediated invasion is a dimension of the individual and the society that interacts with the sexuality, economic hardships, and an existential crisis of the character at play. The cinematic visualisation of the filmmaker is juxtaposed with actions of looking and watching as a narrative of the urban life. The hidden camera is a symbolic tool of power to watch not for any sexual impulse but a craving for love and being loved. This poetic treatment of the voyeur makes the film powerful in a poetic expression that is so quintessential about Dasgupta. He has crafted *The Voyeurs* through a bifocal lens that distinguishes the infatuation, attraction, emotions, and romanticism of an individual torn in search of an imaginary love and the parallel mechanisms of the state through its cameras and surveillance to hunt for a terrorist. That Yasin is killed by mistake is just an excuse to obliterate the failure of the state to respect the individual identity. Yasin's identity is not lost to the police; rather, it is not important in their worldview as the top official shares his 'mosquito killing' analogy to a media person. To appreciate these two parallel universes of looking and watching is one of the major takeaways from Dasgupta - a poet and a filmmaker at the same time.

Ami, Yasin Ar Amar Madhubala

(English: *The Voyeurs*)

Director: Buddhadeb Dasgupta

Producer: Anuradha Prasad,

Shanjeev Shankar Prasad

Writer: Buddhadeb Dasgupta

Major Cast:

Amitav Bhattacharya as *Yasin*

Prasenjit Chatterjee as *Dilip*

Sameera Reddy as *Rekha*

Music: Biswadeep Dasgupta

Cinematography: Sunny Joseph

Editor: Amitava Dasgupta

Release date: 10 September 2007

(at Toronto International Film Festival)

Running time 115 minutes

Country: India

Language Bengali

Conclusion

Buddhadeb Dasgupta is a filmmaker who presents the obvious day to day life actions of the ordinary on the screen with his poetic imagination but tweaks his audience to different streams of consciousness at the same time. In *The Voyeurs*, we see the emotions, expressions, and perceptions about love as a space-defying attempt to transcend the limits of public and the private in the actions of Dilip and Yasin. Their experimentations with gazing into the woman's private space next door take a tragic turn at the end, pointing towards the dangers of crossing those limits. The tension between the moralities, ethics, norms of the society and the individual yearning to be part of the private space of the desired ones forms the foreground of the cinematic narrative. On the other hand, we see surveillance as an emerging tool of power appropriation in the hands of the state and the voyeuristic undertones of the authorities. The public space is no more public. Rather, it is a continuum of the private spaces of individuals (like the lovers sitting in a park), seemingly overthrown by the technological installations of all forms. *The*

Voyeurs travels between these two world and the skill with which these tensions are portrayed on the screen talks volumes about the filmmaker.

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