




ARTS
ILLUSTRATED

A dark, atmospheric night scene. In the upper right, a bright, glowing moon is partially obscured by wispy white clouds. Below the moon, the dark silhouette of a building's roofline is visible against the night sky. The lower portion of the image is mostly black, with some faint, blurry light trails and a small, out-of-focus green light source in the lower right quadrant.

Time passed with the grace of light.
And once again, a new story began
in the inside of darkness.



The Beetle and the Leaf

Unravelling the sinuous lines that connect cinema and art in an irresistible web of imagery, both the overt and the subverted, creating experiences that go beyond the frame of the canvas and the canvas of the screen

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There's a story that goes like this: A little beetle, lost in the forest, is trying to find his way back home. As it happens in most of these lost-now-found-again stories, the beetle met three 'wise' animals on its way. The wise Owl, the epitome of intelligence wearing round black glasses, no less, told the beetle his home was where his heart was. The beetle tried to go into his heart, but couldn't. The wise caterpillar sitting on top of a mushroom, smoking a hookah, no less, told the beetle home was where dreams resided. The beetle tried to sleep and dream, but the minute he woke up to go into the dream, he found that he couldn't; the dream had disappeared like breath spent and forgotten. The wise rabbit, full of important busy-ness looking at a stop-watch, no less, told the beetle home was where time stopped to rest. The beetle tried his best to find that rest house, but couldn't. Then the beetle found a nice, big leaf, settled underneath it and said, 'Ah, home at last.'

The reason for this made up and not-so-Aesop-fable is that this is the only way I can bring some semblance of an understanding to this constantly swirling and churning world of Cinema and Art, with the capital C and capital A. When the beetle is cinema, then the leaf is art and when the beetle is art, the leaf is cinema, because when they find each other, what we discover is the comforting regularity of the heart, the limitlessness of dreams and the relentlessness of time, both frozen and fluid, and that here, in the precision of the frame and the stylisation of the shot and the extravagance of colour and the subtlety

of subverted visual brilliance, we discover a sense of home, after all.

As a cinema buff, I can find the 'art' element in any film that I watch, even if it is a commercial wagon-pulling beast like the recently released *Kabali* – surely, in that montage of memories that sweeps the just-out-of-jail *Kabali* (played by Rajnikanth) of his heavily pregnant wife he believes is dead, there is art, especially in that one shot when she is sitting on the red-bricked floor, flanked by rough stone pillars, the light of the setting sun falling exactly on her face. Surely, in that scene when *Kabali* discovers his daughter is indeed alive in the middle of a fight breaking out between gun-wielding gangsters, there is art in the way time slows down for him as he takes in that

moment of truth. The art we resonate with in cinema – such a subjective (and therefore dangerous) terrain – is replete with instances we identify with; we somehow glorify it, cast it into carefully sculpted moulds and let it remain in our memories for us to revisit as and when we please. This, to my mind, is recurrent art in cinema – it springs from a personal narrative that I can maybe explain but seldom define. Then, there is this rare breed of filmmakers who are also artists and that is where, perhaps, the well of cinema and art's inter-relationship truly resides. And it's a well, no doubt; the deeper you dig, the more you find, but for the purposes of this story we stick to the works of five filmmakers who straddle these worlds with the agility and grace of a prized jockey – M. F. Husain (Indian), Steve McQueen (British), Julian Schnabel (American), Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thai), and the couple, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

(Lebanese). The 'art' in their cinema isn't just in the frame or the light or the colour or the movement of the shot or the deep layering of the subject – all part of recurrent art motifs – but it is simply in the fact that they view the world of cinema through the fearless lens of art; cinema becomes not an extension of their art or their personalities but a tool they use to better the art they wish the world to see. It's a tightrope walk, this subtle inflection of meaning (just as it is between artist and artiste), but it is exactly like that beetle that settles under that big leaf and finds the equanimous rhythm of home.

Frame-less heads on continuous walls

When M.F. Husain's second film, *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities* released in 2004, it was a disaster at the box office, just as his first film, *Gaja Gamini*. The filmmaking was clunky, the

screenplay too complex, and the performances were below average, even with the brilliant Tabu at the helm. The film was screened at the IFFI Panorama 2004 and the director's statement for the film said: 'After *Gaja Gamini*, I had sworn to myself that I wouldn't make another film. Whatever I wanted to say through the medium of cinema I had said. Moreover, 50–60 paintings, drawings and digital images had culminated out of the *Gaja Gamini* experience. The idea for *Meenaxi* came about because of my friend (painter) Tyeb Mehta. He pointed out that *Gaja Gamini* had been shot entirely on studio sets; he suggested that I should now take the camera out to the landscape, and transform the written word of the script into a landscape of cities. Cities have always been one of my favourite themes. I have painted Varanasi, Kolkata, and there was Rome in 1957. Big cities fascinate me, which is why perhaps I have never lived outside

M.F. Husain, Still from the film *Gaja Gamini*, 2000
Image Credit: Yash Raj Films & Owais Husain Studio.





M.F. Husain, Stills from the film *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities*, 2004 Image Courtesy of Owais Husain Studio.



M.F. Husain, *Gaja Gamini in Paris*, 2000 Image Courtesy of Owais Husain Studio

a city.' The three cities featured in Meenaxi, as a struggling writer attempts to place his muse in different settings, are Jaisalmer, Hyderabad and Prague. Visually, the cities become inspired versions of Husain's own interpretation of his imagination, with loud colours and omnipresent pots for Jaisalmer; garish extravagance for Hyderabad and stark contrasts of black and white for Prague. But over and above the explosion of colour and stylised costumes and elaborately constructed sets and exquisitely performed songs – all of which, somehow, you expect in Husain's grammar of art – was the almost intrinsic command he had of the frames. Not once did the camera stutter or look unsure; it was like a studied, methodical deconstruction of conventional practices. In one of his interviews, he had said, 'I never visualise anything completely before I start out on a painting or

on a film. I avoid the conventional elements, like Luis Bunuel I try to break the logic of placing two images together, like say the images of a horse and a woman'. In Meenaxi, there is the appearance of a horse in one of the songs, except it is juxtaposed with the male protagonist. In Gaja Gamini, too, where Madhuri Dixit's face is expertly not revealed for the duration of the song Yeh Gathri Taj ki Tarah, it ends perfectly at a top angle shot with a wall dividing two parts of the stage – on one side is a boat and the other a vintage car, and both have a large book with 'Gyan' or knowledge written on it. It isn't the symbolism of the shot or the inherent philosophical underpinnings of the song that matters here, but how the camera following Madhuri almost sedately, comes to a rest as it moves upward, at exactly the spot where an animal skull on the wall is revealed. It felt as if Husain

was unconsciously guiding our attention not to what is happening inside the frame (the dance, the gyan, the gathri), but what is happening at its periphery, at its edges, on the sides.

This dance of the inward and outward is something I found in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films as well. He comes from an architecture background, even though he knew filmmaking was his ultimate destination, and lately finds that he spends a lot more time in the realm of visual arts through his installations and performances. A three-time winner at the Cannes, Apichatpong's films are like unravelling a puzzle in reverse. You need to disassemble the assembled and put it back together to truly understand the big picture. Here, the frames and the shots are constantly moving and the meaning to be found is in



Apichatpong Weerasethakul,
Stills from the film **Cemetery of Splendour**, 2015,
Photograph by Chai Siris,
Image Courtesy of
Apichatpong Weerasethakul
and Kick the Machine Films



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Still from the film **Cemetery of Splendour**, 2015,
Photograph by Chai Siris, Image Courtesy of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Kick the Machine Films

that movement and not the shot itself. In *Tropical Malady*, for instance, when Keng, the soldier in the first half of the film discovers the stirrings of romance, he rides a bike into the night, a soft song playing in the background, and we see frame upon frame of the street lights above him moving and there is simply no compulsion on Apichatpong to break the monotony of the shot. Instead, he wants us to revel in it, in that sense of time and space, in the ordinariness of it all. He uses the same technique in a later shot in the film when one of the characters wakes up in the morning. It's a stationary shot, no movement, nothing happens, even the table fan isn't whirring, and yet, so much happens inside of us that it is overwhelming. Or in *Syndromes and a Century*, based on the lives of his parents before they met, the camera moves languidly but never without purpose, giving us time to get over the uncomfortable silences of reality. Apichatpong

uses the inward-outward movement with his screenplay as well; experimenting with form and structure freely, without the slightest hint of hesitation. If *Tropical Malady* suddenly switches from one story to a completely unrelated story, then *Syndromes* uses different settings for essentially the same train of thought; in fact, even the dialogues are repeated. In an interview to indieWire in 2007, Apichatpong said, 'I always want to relay many feelings via film. It is hard for me to communicate with people – I want to shake my friends, my partner, for example, and say "look, I am so happy," or I feel this and that. But I cannot get the feelings across through only words. So I made these films to get my message delivered at a certain level. It is hard for me to make a linear narrative because I think our brain doesn't operate like that'.

In Julian Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* that is based on a true story of a man

who is paralysed neck down after a heart attack, but has an active mind, the conventions of filmmaking are again subverted. The film begins putting us right inside Jean-Do's head, with everyone else looking into the camera and talking. In an interview to Francine Stock for the Guardian in 2008, Stock asks, '... We're in his head and I did wonder when I saw it whether you would stay there the whole time. But you couldn't. Why not?' to which Schnabel says quite easily, 'Everybody would have left. My editor said, "How long are you going to do this?" I said, as long as possible. What's interesting about it is that usually when people talk to the camera in a movie, the movie stops. In this case everybody talks to the camera, so you don't even realise there's nobody in the middle between you and that person. It's just a convention of the film. I think it has to do with, if you see a painting of a bunch of people, you're fit into that rectangle. I'm a big Caravaggio fan and I like



● Julian Schnabel, Still from the film *Before Night Falls*, 2000
Image Credit: Fine Line Features



● Julian Schnabel, Still from the film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2007, Image Credit: Pathé (France) & Miramax Films

● Julian Schnabel, Still from the film *Miral*, 2010
Image Credit: Pathé (France 2010) & The Weinstein Company (USA 2011)



● Julian Schnabel, Still from the film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2007, Image Credit: Pathé (France) & Miramax Films

● Julian Schnabel, on set, filming *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2007
Image Credit: Pathé (France) & Miramax Films



when the edge of the picture goes past the edge of the frame. And I like that in movies too, so the fact there's no one between you and the people that are talking to you is very satisfying to me, because it's like you're watching a fragment of a larger whole. And you're getting a slice out of that, so it feels like virtual reality: it's not a regular movie. I think the reason I like to film water moving or ice is that it's so physical. You feel like the screen could fall on you, and I like thinking of the screen as a sculpture...'

Weathered bodies lined in pain

In 2008, my friends and I, on a particularly pleasant evening in London, walked into a theatre during the City of London Festival to watch a film by a student of one of the friends, Gap the Mind, that was to be played before the screening of *Hunger* by Steve McQueen. After all the whistling and clapping for the student film, we all fell into a silence – deep and long – as we watched *Hunger*, based on the Irish hunger strike

of 1981. The bloodied knuckles, the bloodied cough travelling from the stomach to the throat, the bed sores like craters, and just the sharp focus on the human body was like someone shining a torch directly into our eyes and, yet, we simply couldn't look away. It was much later, much after the night was spent talking about Irish politics and the film, that I realised that what Steve McQueen had done was to make me acutely aware of the paradox of my own body – of how frail and powerful it was. And this obsession, for lack of a



● Steve McQueen, Still from the film *Hunger*, 2008
Image Credit: Icon Film Distribution

● Steve McQueen, Still from the film *12 Years a Slave*, 2013, Image Credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures, Entertainment One & Summit Entertainment

● Steve McQueen, Still from the film *Shame*, 2011 Image Credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures



Julian Schnabel, Still from the film *Before Night Falls*, 2000
Image Credit: Fine Line Features

better word, with the body is something that he continues in his other films as well. Be it his first short film *Bear* that used a wrestling match between two men to talk about violence and eroticism, to his Academy Award winning *12 Years a Slave*, where again it is the body that is sold to slavery, the hands that are chained and pick the cotton and play the violin and ultimately write that letter of freedom, McQueen's use of the body as a tool of expression is a deeply artistic understanding of the human condition. In an interview with Edwin Adrian Nieves (more on this Tumblr post <http://tinyurl.com/j353gfm>), McQueen says, 'Film is important; it can be more than reportage or a novel—it creates images people have never seen before, never imagined they'd see, maybe because they needed someone else to imagine them.'

An echo of this sentiment can be found in Julian Schnabel's films as well. The most obvious use of the body is in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, but where, strangely, it is the absence of the body that makes it that much more powerful and surreal. In *Before Night Falls*, based on the autobiography of exiled Cuban poet and novelist

Reinaldo Arenas, it is through the exploration of his body that Reinaldo discovers himself. In Apitchatpong's *Cemetery of Splendour* that is set in a hospital of soldiers suffering from a form of sleeping sickness, it is the bodies again, lying listlessly on the beds, forever dreaming, or that soldier who midway through his meal falls down flat on his plate of food into a sudden slumber, that speaks to us. As it does in *Open the Door* where the simple exercise of taking a class photo becomes an exercise in artfully framing that photo with the 12-year-old boy who is already six feet tall. Filmmaker and artist



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Still from the film *Open The Door*, 2006, Image Courtesy of the filmmakers.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Still from the film *Je Veux Voir (I want to see)*, 2008, Image Courtesy of the filmmakers.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Still from the film *Khiam 2000 - 2007*, 2008, Image Courtesy of the filmmakers.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Stills from the film *A Perfect Day*, 2005, Image Courtesy of the filmmakers.

couple, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's explain on their website: 'A child, taller than the others, not knowing what to do with his cumbersome body; a disproportionate body, so abnormal that it turns an assumed handicap into an asset, into a type of resistance to the uniformity which tends to supersede our present world; a body that seems off-beat in a modern world always seeking more speed, more achievements... The emergence of the individual is central to our cinema. When and how does one detach himself from the group and dare to assert one's difference?' And this same ideology informs *Je Veux Voir (I Want to See)* that is set in a very different Lebanon, after the 2006 war. But instead of filming the devastation as is, Joana and Khalil do the opposite – they film it from the outside. Again, it's the inward-outward movement that we see, with French star Catherine Deneuve going on a drive through Lebanon together with Rabih Mroué, an artist and actor the couple work with. 'We badly wanted to do a film on this war but we were full of questions: In the face of a very violent war, of the spectacular images of television, what kind of images could we produce? What can cinema do in such situations of extreme violence? We decided to ask this question in a direct way, to introduce fiction by way of a cinema icon, in a situation which seems to admit only a flood of images hastily termed real or documentary.' The result is a disturbing experience, and sort of from the same spectrum of watching a McQueen film – you become aware of your sense of place in this vastly unfamiliar world masquerading within our familiar bodies.

Eyes that watch the world to not forget

One of the greatest gifts of memory is the soft edges it brings with it. Even the hardest truth or the biggest revelation is somehow subdued in memory. Our reactions to it might oscillate wildly, alternately hypnotising us into meek acceptance or pumping us up with quiet arguments, like the films of these artist-filmmakers that present something alarmingly personal in distant worlds. But the memory itself, somehow, remains untouched, like the pearl inside that oyster, like eyes (or the lens) watching the world (or the film), or, lest we forget, that beetle under the leaf.

