

LANDSCAPE AS A SIGNIFIER OF RURAL SOCIAL CLASS INEQUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKAN CINEMA: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THREE SELECTED FILMS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how surrounding landscape elements of rural settlements function as visual signifiers of social class inequality in contemporary Sri Lankan cinema through an analytical study of three films: Sarigama, Vishama Bhaga, and Paradise. While social class representation has been widely discussed in film studies, limited attention has been given to how environmental contexts of rural settlements visually communicate class divisions. This research, therefore, investigates the role of landscape elements as cinematic signifiers of inequality. A mixed method approach has been followed, and the results obtained from interviews with three film directors and the online survey results of 203 participants, with the primary analysis group being 150 participants belonging to the age group of 19–25 years, were used. Some frames of the film, which highlighted the contrasts of class, were shown to the participants in grayscale to avoid any visual distractions and identify the pictorial landscape elements such as sky-scape, bio-scape, water-scape, vegetation-scape, landform-scape, street-scape, and archi-scape. Audience interpretations were further analyzed using four social class inequality indicators: cultural objects, physical appearance, behavior and speech. The findings reveal a hierarchy in the effectiveness of landscape indicators in communicating class inequality, with landform-scape emerging as the most influential element. Open and elevated terrains were frequently associated with upper-class rural environments, whereas enclosed or fragmented landforms indicated lower-class spaces. Overall, the study demonstrates that rural landscape elements function as significant semiotic tools through which filmmakers construct and audiences interpret social class inequality in contemporary Sri Lankan cinema.

Keywords: Contemporary Sri Lankan Cinema; Social Class Inequality; Visual Landscape Elements.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema is a complex combination of various parts, which include the audio, the visuals, and the narrative. It is not the narrative is being portrayed; rather, it is the overall effect

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of the influences of the backgrounds. With the development of the film industry, directors convey complex ideas through cinematic elements such as frame composition, colour, lighting and shadow (Wu, 2024).

According to German philosopher Karl Marx, the way in which a group of people participates in public things and services is considered as a social class. A social class stratification system can be seen in the 21st century Sri Lankan social class system depending on the educational level and economic status. There are four main social class levels i.e. (i) upper class, (ii) upper middle class, (iii) lower middle class, and (iv) low class (Riswan, 2014). This study aims to examine the contribution of the landscape signifiers of rural settlements in depicting the gap between two of any social classes in contemporary Sri Lankan cinema.

For this study, the films "Sarigama (2016)", "Vishama Bhaga (2019)" and "Paradise (2022)" were chosen as the case studies. The study examines to what extent directors use this visual landscape in depicting the social imbalance, and to what extent the audience takes the message that the director gives using the landscape signifiers of the rural environments.

Academic literature around the Sri Lankan cinema has not really looked into how the surroundings in a film, can show the differences between rural settlements. By examining this phenomenon systematically, researchers can contribute to the enhancement of cinematic representations of social class inequality. This study aims to fill the gap regarding how the countryside and villagers are visualised in films to highlight the differences between upper class and lower-class people in Sri Lankan cinema today. It also aims to start a conversation about importance of the landscape in film production.

1.1 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to examine how surrounding landscape elements of rural settlements function as visual indicators of social class inequality in contemporary Sri Lankan cinema. By analysing selected scenes from Sarigama, Vishama Bhaga, and Paradise, the study seeks to identify how specific landscape indicators contribute to the cinematic representation of class differences. The study will evaluate how these environmental elements interact with social class indicators to shape audience perceptions of social inequality in rural contexts. The objectives for the study are as follows,

1. Identify the visual landscape elements and their parameters that reflect the environmental context of rural settlements in selected Sri Lankan films.
2. Examine the awareness of the selected film directors of these visual landscape elements and how they intentionally or intuitively apply them in their work.
3. Investigate the extent to which film audiences recognise and interpret these landscape elements within the environmental context of rural settlements.
4. Develop a framework illustrating how the environmental context of rural settlements has been used to depict social class identity and inequality in the selected films.

1.2 SCOPE LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations, as the analysis has been carried out only based on the three selected case studies, i.e. (i) Sarigama (2016), (ii) Vishama Bhaga (2019), and (iii)

Paradise (2022). Therefore, the findings of the analysis cannot be generalised to the whole of contemporary Sri Lankan cinema. The interpretation of the environmental contexts as well as the social classes, has been based on the visual frames selected, and the perceptions of the audience sample, which comprised young adults belonging to the age group of 19-25 years. The analysis has been carried out in an in-depth manner, which adds to the value of the study, as the focus has been on the symbolism of class through the landscapes depicted in the cinematic works selected.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 ROLAND BARTHES' SEMIOTIC THEORY

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory provides an effective tool for the analysis of the representation of social class and inequality through visual and material signs (Du et al., 2025) (refer Figure 1). Barthes' semiotic theory distinguished between the denotation and the connotation of the signs. Denotation refers to the explicit meaning of the signs (Du et al., 2025), while connotation refers to the cultural and ideological meaning associated with the signs. Using Barthes' semiotic theory, the role of interior spaces in the representation of social inequality and class distinction can be effectively analysed. Barthes' semiotic theory also helped to explain the role of signs in the representation and naturalisation of social inequality and class distinction. According to Barthes' semiotic theory, signs can become part of the cultural and ideological representation and can be viewed as natural facts. In the context of the representation of social inequality and class distinction in films, the role of interior spaces can be viewed as signs and can be analysed effectively using Barthes' semiotic theory (Du et al., 2025).



Figure 1 :Roland Barthes' semiotic theory: Barthes (1993) redrawn by author

2.2 SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is the study of the role of signs in communication and the creation of meanings in society (Saussure, 2011). It is the study of how various types of signs, such as images and objects, create social and cultural meanings in society. According to Saussure (2011), the signifier is the form of the sign, and the signified is the concept that the sign represents, and the two have a relationship in the creation of meanings.

This concept of denotation and connotation was further developed by Barthes when he introduced the concept of myth as a system of signs that operates on multiple levels. These signs consist of denotation and connotation as major components (Saussure, 2011). In the context of interior spaces in Sri Lankan cinema on the theme of rural housing, the semiotic approach is a method of interpretation for the signs within the interior spaces that reflect social class and challenge the inequalities of society. The furniture, decor, and arrangement within the interior spaces of the rural housing depicted in the cinema constitute signs that communicate social values, status, and identity. The semiotic approach to signs within the interior spaces is a method of interpretation for the

ideological content of the signs within the cinematic representation of the rural housing. (Saussure, 2011)

2.3 FILM AS A MEDIUM FOR COMMUNICATING SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Cinema is not a neutral recording of reality. It is a culturally constructed medium that actively produces social meanings. Hall (1997) argues that visual signs operate within cultural codes that connect images to broader social meanings. In film, this includes every element of the frame such as lighting, composition, setting, and the surrounding environment.

2.4 LANDSCAPE AS AN IDEOLOGICAL SIGNIFIER

Landscape is not simply a backdrop. It is an active instrument of cultural force through which social identities are constructed (Mitchell, 1994). Cosgrove (1984) further established that landscape is a profoundly ideological concept. The way classes portray themselves is mediated through their depicted relationship with the physical environment (Cosgrove, 1984). In cinema, these ideological encodings of landscape become a visual language. Through this, filmmakers communicate class hierarchies without explicit narrative statement (Turner, 1993).

2.5 SOCIAL CLASS AND VISUAL REPRESENTATION IN CINEMA

Social class is not just about how much money people have it is also about the way they live and the things they value (Bourdieu, 1984). When the audience watches films, there can see class in the places and environments where the characters live. These places can show if the characters are from the upper class or if they are powerful depending on how the film visualises them.

2.6 SOCIAL CLASSES IN SRI LANKA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Sri Lanka's social class structure changed a lot after the country opened up its economy in the 1970s and 1980s (Kelegama, 2006). Class distinctions were not prominently evident in the initial phases. However, they became progressively apparent by the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century (Kelegama, 2006). In Sri Lankan society, the main ways to tell the difference between social classes are economic status, political power and social networks (Riswan, 2014). Contemporary Sri Lankan society can be broadly classified into four distinct social class strata (refer Figure 2).

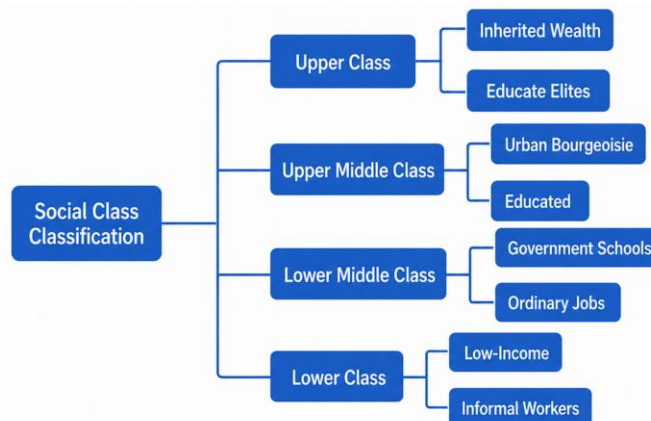


Figure 2 :Social class classification in Sri Lanka

2.7 SOCIAL CLASS INEQUALITY

Social class inequality is the unequal distribution of privileges, opportunities, and resources among the various social classes in each society (Crossman, 2025). It is reflected the existence of wealth, income, education, healthcare, and social class differences. Social class inequality has a major impact on the lives and mobility of people in the respective societies (Oracle, 2025; Fiveable, 2024). It is built on the economic, historic, and structural pillars and is sustained through inheritance, discriminatory behaviour, and unequal quality of education and work opportunities (Oracle, 2025). It not only causes the misfortune of the individual but also creates societal ills such as poverty, loneliness, stagnation of health levels, and intergenerational patterns of marginalization (StudyRocket, n.d; Huberty, n.d). Therefore, understanding social class inequality means understanding the complex premises and the widespread impact on the lives and societies of people in the respective societies.

2.7.1 Indicators of Social Class Inequality

In this study, four key indicators are used to perceive and reinforce social class inequality, based on observable cues that communicate economic and social status (Kraus et al., 2017).

1. Cultural Objects: Clothing and attire, possessions and material items
2. Physical Appearance: Facial features and grooming, photographs and visual cues
3. Behaviour: Gestures and mannerisms, short behavioural snippets
4. Speech: Linguistic patterns and accents, speech style and pronunciation

2.8 VISUAL LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS

Visual landscape elements are the special elements that determine the appearance and character of an environmental context. They are mainly divided into two parts as natural landscapes and man-made landscapes. The natural landscape elements include sky, land, and water, and the man-made elements include buildings and roads. The following classification provides a good understanding of the role of environmental context and landscape composition (Ho, 2023).

1. Sky-scape- sky
2. Bio-scape- Animal, Human
3. Water-scape- Vertical-water (fountain, waterfall), Horizon-water (lake, pool, river)
4. Vegetation-scape- Woody-plant (Palm, tree, flora), Herb-plants (grass), Flower
5. Landform-scape- Horizon-land (ground, field, sand), Vertical-land (rock, mountain)
6. Street-scape- Sign (poster, signboards), Vehicles (bike, van, car, bus), Street-furniture (sculpture, chair, pot), Roadways (sidewalks, roads)
7. Archi-scape- Archi-parts (step, wall, window), Architecture (settlements, building, tower)

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, comprising case study analysis, director interviews, and an audience questionnaire.

3.1 CASE STUDY SELECTION

The following framework was used to select suitable films for the study.

1. Released within the contemporary cinema era.
2. Won or been nominated for national or international awards.
3. Represented the social class inequality through a rural settlement environment.
4. Used landscape as a tool to express social class inequality.

Three films were selected to cover the contemporary cinema era in accordance with this framework; “Sarigama” (2016), “Vishama Bhaga” (2019), and “Paradise” (2023). (refer Figure 3).



Figure 3: Selected films: Internet

3.2 EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Interviews with the directors of the three films provide insight into their use of landscape in their films, the extent to which they use landscape, and their awareness and use of visual landscape elements.

3.3 SCENE SELECTION AND AUDIENCE RESPONSES

Based on the available academic literature and insights gathered through expert interviews, several film frames were chosen that most effectively illustrated the depiction of social class inequality through the surrounding landscape context of rural settlements in the selected films. These frames were then organised into two categories representing upper and lower social class environments, according to how the spatial and environmental characteristics supported the portrayal of class differences. To maintain analytical balance, four frames were selected for each class category.

To reduce the potential influence of colour-related distractions and to direct attention toward spatial composition and landscape elements, all selected frames were converted into grayscale. (Clark, 2005).

Following the classification approach proposed by Li et al. (2025), the selected frames were also evaluated based on the proportion of artificial components present within the landscape setting (refer Figure 4). Accordingly, four levels were defined to represent varying degrees of naturalness within the scene:

1. Full naturalness: less than 5% artificial elements.
2. Most naturalness: 5–25% artificial elements.

3. More artificial work: 25–55% artificial elements.
4. Most artificial work: 55–75% artificial elements.

Each frame was overlaid with a 10x10 grid of analysis cells, dividing each frame into 100 equal-sized cells to assess how much of the scene is natural and how much is man-made, enabling a structured visual.

The audience was then shown this graph and asked to identify the social level (high or low) represented by each column. Then, a Likert scale was used to ask how much attention they paid to the visual landscape elements (refer Figure 4).

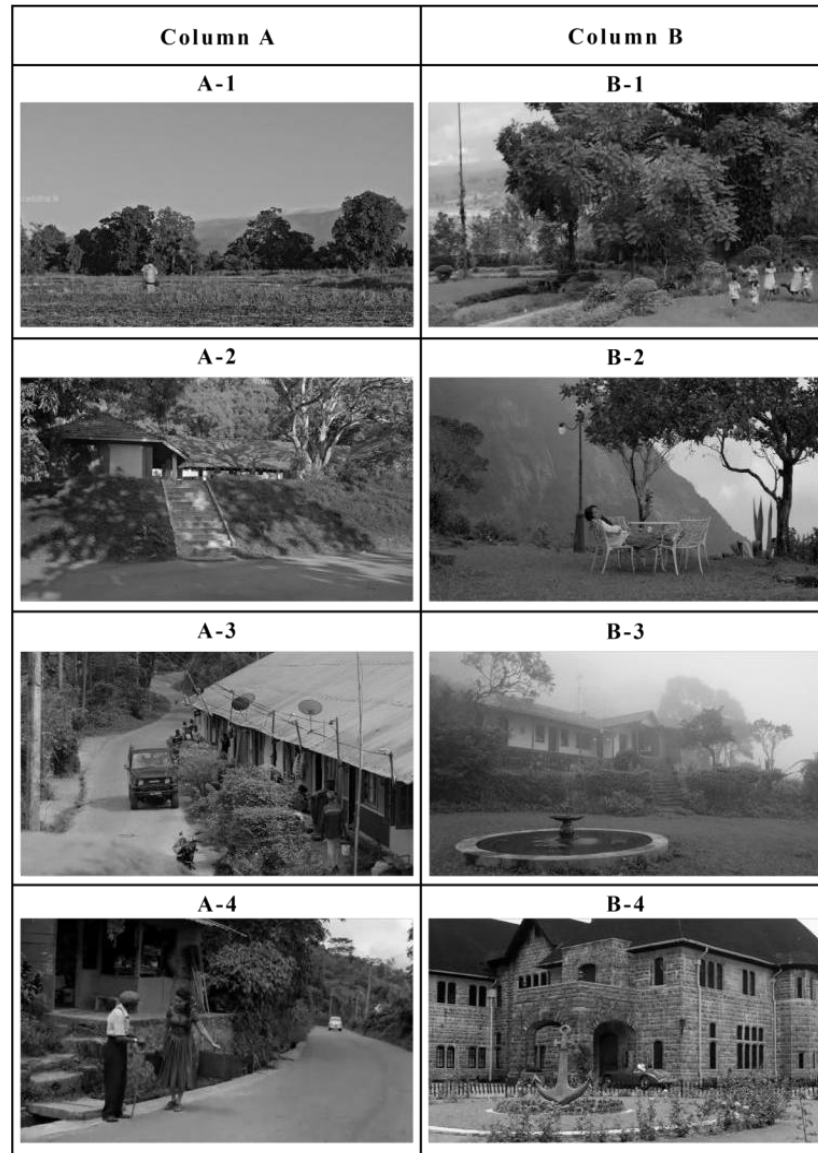


Figure 4: Selected frames list given in questionnaire (1) Full naturalness, (2) Most naturalness, (3) More artificial works, and (4) Most artificial works. Column A represents the low class and Column B represents the high class: Author

3.4 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF IMAGE SELECTION

Still frames were deliberately selected over moving sequences to isolate landscape elements from narrative and temporal dimensions. Frames were chosen based on

directors' visual intent. A grid-based selection criteria was applied across all three films. Participants were asked whether they had previously watched the selected films; however, prior viewing showed no significant impact on responses. It is acknowledged as a limitation that sequential and transitional dimensions of the moving image were not captured in this phase.

4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 DIRECTORIAL PERSPECTIVES ON VISUAL LANDSCAPE CHARACTERISTICS

Insights for this study were gathered from qualitative interviews with three experienced movie directors in Sri Lanka.

4.1.1 The Contribution of Landscape to Creating Narratives in Cinema

The three directors share the view that landscape in cinema is far more than a mere backdrop. It is an active storytelling tool. They identified three core roles of landscape:

1. Symbolic expression - Landscape reflects the historical era, political climate, and spiritual values of the society being portrayed.
2. Silent communication - Rather than relying on lengthy dialogue, landscape allows directors to convey meaning and emotion directly to the audience.
3. Class commentary - The background environment subtly signals the characteristics and contrasts of different social classes, making inequality visible without stating it explicitly.

4.1.2 The Use of Landscape as a Social Class Identity

According to the directors, they draw a clear distinction between how different environments represent different socioeconomic groups:

Higher social class is linked to places that feel comfortable look good and feel safe. These places are big, clean and high up making people feel special and stable. The directors have shown social class through surroundings that are spacious well-kept and elevated, which reinforce a sense of privilege and stability (refer Figure 5).



Figure 5: Higher social class representations in selected films

Lower social class is portrayed through challenging living conditions. It is depicted in areas characterised by small houses and limited resources, highlighting the daily struggles

individuals face in sustaining their livelihoods. The directors portray social class through environments of scarcity and hardship (refer Figure 6).



Figure 6: Lower social class representation in selected films

They emphasise that natural and built environments work together as cues allowing audiences to immediately recognise a characters economic and social standing.

4.1.3 Practical Contribution of Landscape Features in Cinema

Directors intuitively draw on visual landscape features, such as scale, complexity, naturalness, and stewardship, to communicate social class differences in contemporary Sri Lankan cinema, even without consciously naming these elements. This subtle use of landscape as a marker of inequality was mostly recognized and appreciated by discerning, culturally informed audiences (refer Figure 7).

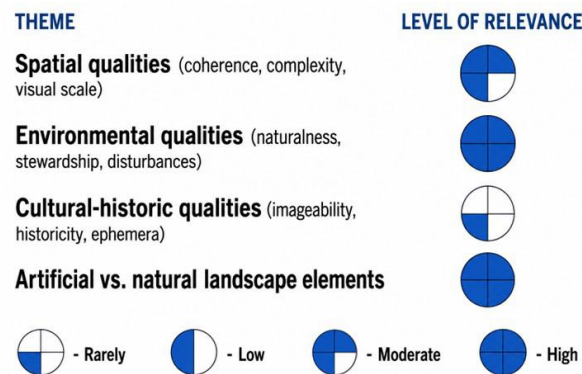


Figure 7: Thematic relevance for analyzing social class inequality in cinematic landscapes

4.1.4 Application of Directorial Insights for Frame Selection

The interview findings confirmed that the directors intentionally use landscape as a visual device to communicate social class differences. Attention was given to landscape cues such as landform conditions, settlement quality, vegetation management, spatial openness, and the relationship between natural and built elements. These insights guided the selection of still frames for the audience survey. The selected frames represented the landscape characteristics identified during the interviews and provided a consistent basis for evaluating audience interpretations of social class inequality. Section 4.2 examines how audiences responded to these visually selected frames.

4.2 AUDIENCE RESPONSES

Both male and female in the age group of 19-25 years pay analytical attention to the content of the films while watching them (Patel et al., 2025). Out of 203 valid audience responses obtained in this study, 150 were students in this age group. Therefore, those 150 responses were considered for the analysis and gender did not affect this study. A classification according to their educational level is shown in Figure 8.

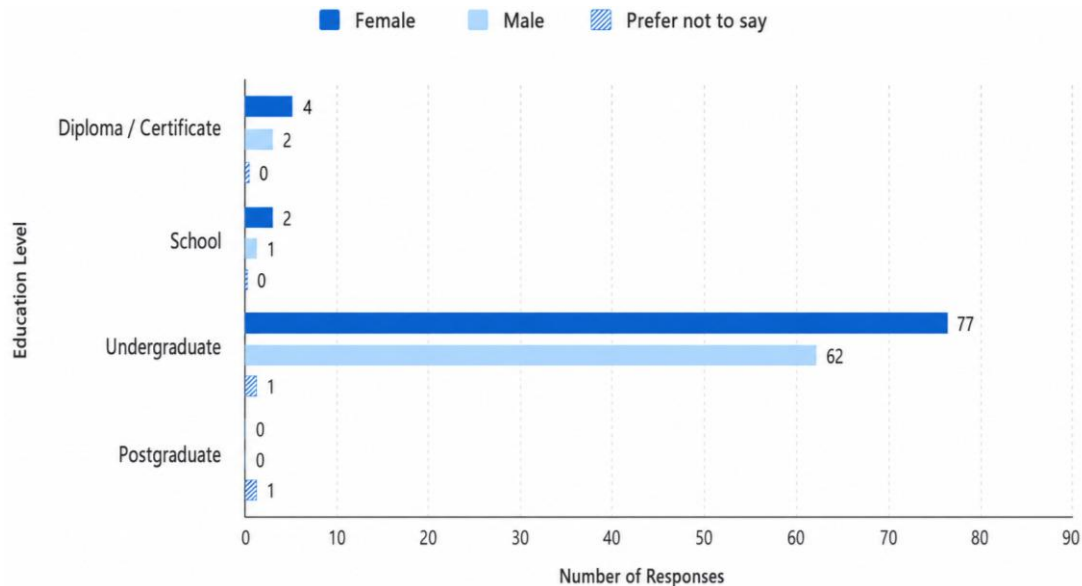


Figure 8: Gender and education level count of the responses

From the collected data, the extent to which respondents pay attention to the environmental context while watching films is shown in Figure 9. The majority of the respondents (n=84,56%) stated that they are paying moderate attention to the background environment.

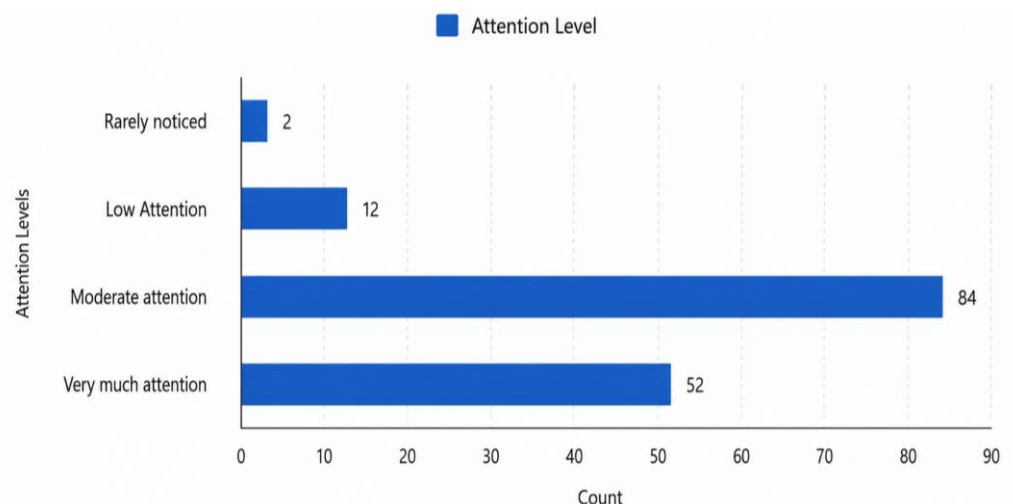


Figure 9: Audiences' attention to the background landscape when watching a film

A majority of the respondents agreed that the environmental background of rural settlements can be used to depict social and economic conditions in cinema (refer Figure 10).

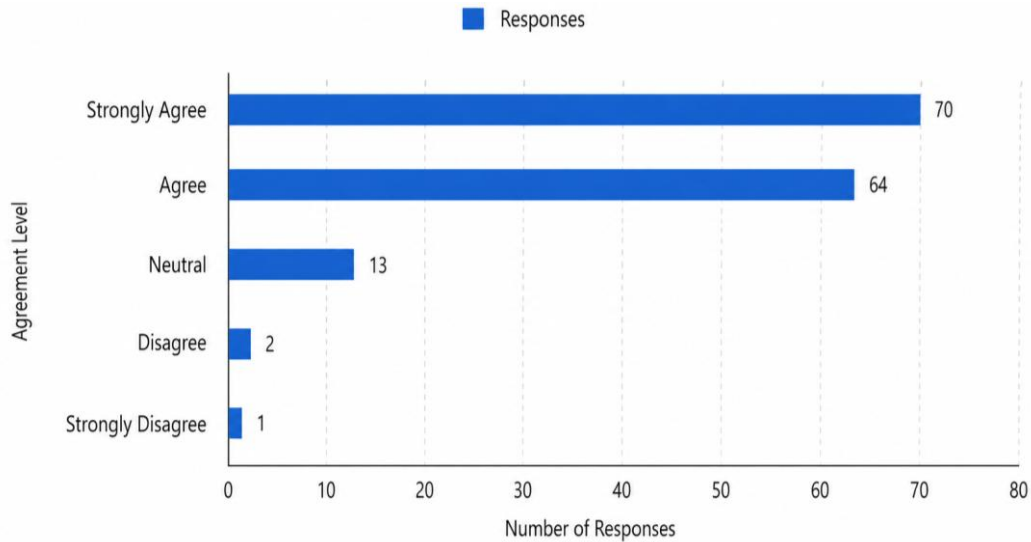


Figure 10: Respondents' agreement on the role of the environmental context depicting social and economic realities in film

Considering the total responses, the participant have focused on the landscape elements in rural environments to identify inequality in social class levels (refer Figure 11).

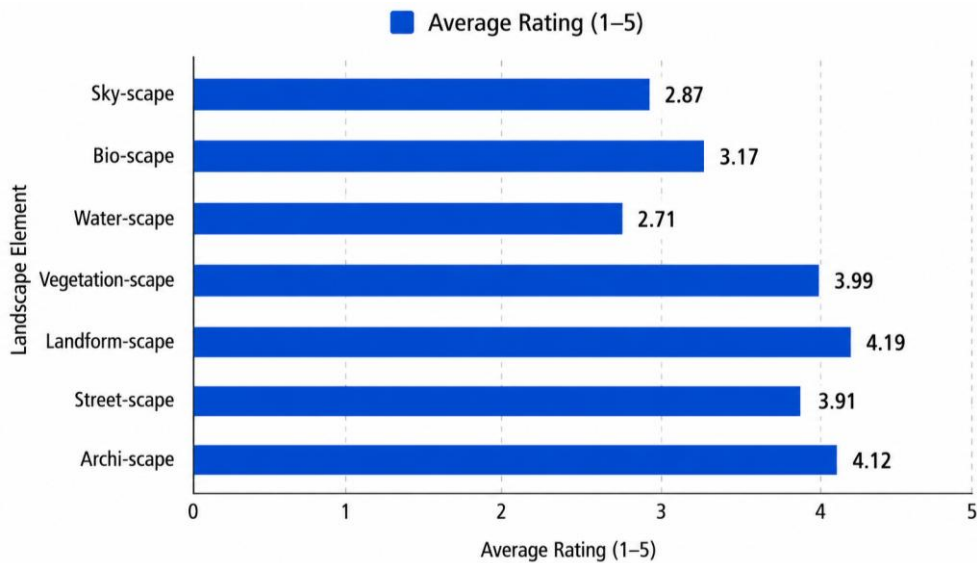


Figure 11: Respondents' engagement level with visual landscape elements

Based on the diagram (refer Figure 4) provided in the questionnaire, 139 (93%) respondents selected the column that correctly represented the relevant social class. The way in which it deviated from the overall value, a final hierarchy can be reached regarding the relevance of these visual landscape elements. This is because the accuracy of the responses of the respondents who correctly identified the relevant social class in the diagram increases. The graph obtained in this way is shown in Figure 12.

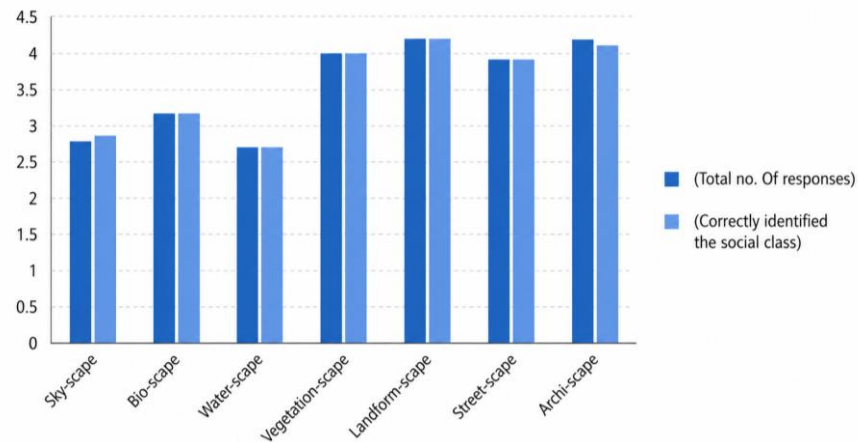


Figure 12: Deviation between total respondents and those who correctly identified social class

As the variations among the findings in Figure 12 are minimal, a hierarchical ranking was established (refer Figure 13) to better understand their differences. The results indicate that greater attention is given to the environmental context of rural settlements, including spatial organization, material conditions, and settlement environments, while comparatively less attention is given to aquatic or water-related elements when representing social class differences in films.

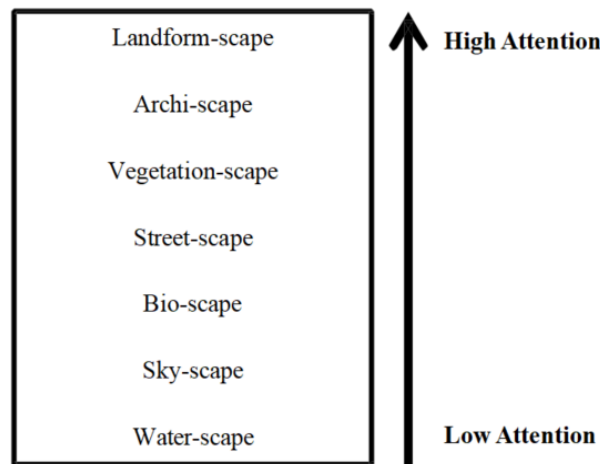


Figure 13: Hierarchy of audience attention level for the visual landscape elements in cinema

These findings were based solely on the analysis of three chosen contemporary Sri Lankan films. As may be seen from the findings, it is quite evident that the environmental setting of rural settlements in these chosen contemporary Sri Lankan films plays a significant role in portraying social class inequality in contemporary Sri Lankan cinema.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on findings from the literature review, interviews, and audience responses, this study proposes guidelines for using the environmental context of rural settlements to represent social class inequality in contemporary Sri Lankan cinema. The findings show how the class differences are effectively conveyed through visual landscape elements (refer Table 1).

Table 1: Use of visual landscape elements in rural settlements to depict social class in selected films

Visual Landscape Element in Rural Settlements	Subsections	Visual Use for Depicting Social Class Inequality in Selected Films
Landform-scape	Horizon land (fields, ground, paths, sand)	Modified and level land indicates higher class;
	Vertical land (rocks, hills, mountains)	uneven, eroded, or unmanaged land represents lower class
Archi-scape	Architectural parts (steps, doors, windows, walls)	Permanent and well-maintained settlements suggest higher class;
	Buildings (houses, storage structures)	Temporary or deteriorated settlements suggest lower class
Vegetation-scape	Woody plants (trees, palms)	Controlled and productive vegetation reflects higher class;
	Herb plants (grass)	Overgrown or neglected vegetation reflects lower class
	Flowering plants	
Streetscape	Signs (signboards, markers)	Paved roads and infrastructure indicate higher class;
	Street furniture (lights, poles)	mud roads and poor access indicate lower class
	Roadways	
Bio-scape	Humans	Limited physical labour and controlled interaction show higher class;
	Animals	intensive labour and close animal interaction show lower class
Skyscape	Sky	Clear and stable skies frame privileged settings;
		overcast or harsh skies support marginalized conditions
Waterscape	Vertical water (wells, small falls)	Easy access to clean water suggests higher class;
	Horizontal water (tanks, ponds, rivers)	distant or scarce water sources suggest lower class

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows how the landscape elements of rural communities are used to effectively portray social class inequality in contemporary Sri Lankan cinema. The audience identified environmental visual landscape elements to distinguish social classes, as methodically summarised in Table 1. The Discussion section demonstrates how these components work together rather than separately to create a visual system that conveys rural social hierarchies. These observations are combined into a clear analytical framework in the table, which shows how particular environmental conditions are frequently used to represent privilege and marginalisation based on class in a few chosen films. This study offers an organised method for comprehending how the landscape elements of the rural environment are portrayed in films by presenting them as active visual agents rather than a passive background. The suggested framework highlights the

significance of environmental context in examining social inequality in Sri Lankan cinema and provides a useful instrument for further study.

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