

NOTES

THE DIVIDED OBJECT OF DESIRE: A NOTE ON SPECTATORSHIP IN INDIAN CINEMA

SUBHAJIT CHATTERJEE*

In this article I intend to argue that realism as a narrative form in Indian cinema is being rendered ineffective as a mode of social and political critique. I will be using the term 'realist' as a specific reference to the style of filmic narration, assumed to be pioneered by Satyajit Ray and later inherited by a host of filmmakers such as Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Mira Nair, Aparna Sen etc. There is a commonsensical assumption that the 'realist' narrative technique tends to problematise our experience of reality through valuable critical insights. Such an assumption is generally harboured by a section of the educated, urban, middle or upper middle class audience or, in other words, by the addressee of the realist genre. This section often valorises 'realist' over the 'popular cinema' which comes with its repertoire of song-dance sequences, action, romance and comedy. These seem to invert, dilute or even mystify the spectator's experience of everyday reality. In recent times, such simplistic notions have received critical attention from a host of Indian film scholars like Ashish Rajadhyakshya, Ravi S. Vasudevan, M. Madhava Prasad, Moinak Biswas, S.V Srinivas and others who have made crucial contributions to the understanding of Indian Popular Cinema and its reception. In order to arrive at the point I would like to make, I wish to discuss and reformulate some of the theoretical inputs regarding 'spectatorship' in both 'popular' and 'realist' cinema. While doing so I intend to concentrate on Ashish Rajadhyakshya's article 'Who's Looking? Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema', from which I shall be borrowing certain concepts while trying to problematise his overarching theoretical framework. However, being aware of the fact that this kind of an investigation requires proper supportive data and extensive research, I would like this article to be taken as an outline for an argument that would require further development in the future.

Let us start by briefly outlining my understanding of the cinematic experience. Any filmic experience is a product of a complex network of mediations. In the course of production the artist's mediated experience of reality is worked upon by a further level of mediation through the use of the language s/ he chooses, since language pre-exists her/ his use of it. Now it should be noted that cinematic or even other kinds of languages are primarily a public domain and acquire distinct modes of circulation and address, thus creating certain relationships of transaction between spectators, narrators and textual models. Evidently, such relationships also pre-exist any particular use of the textual model. These relations depend upon social, political contexts and therefore vary across time and space. This network of mediations is further complicated by the spectator who brings into the theatre a further variable set of mediations. It is my contention that in order to problematise the popular vs. realist cinema debate much of recent film scholarship has tended to ignore or simplify some of these mediations particularly in the context of reception and mode of address.

There is a unanimous agreement among scholars that the categories of PMR i.e. 'Primitive Mode of Representation' and IMR i.e. Institutional Mode of Representation that have immensely contributed to the understanding of American Cinema, is not particularly useful in the context of Indian Cinema. The dominant mode of cinema in India both before and after independence, have been using a mixture of narrative elements, which can be traced to both PMR and IMR. Thus continuity narration is regularly interrupted by frontal addresses in song and dance sequences, comic interludes, fight spectacles or heightened emotional set pieces. Given this situation there has been a tendency to construct a binary opposition between spectators of 'popular' and 'realist' cinema where the former is conceived to be existing within a pre-rational or 'yet to be modern' paradigm. Chidananda Das Gupta's 'naive spectator' argument is an example of the latter and has received particularly sceptical reception in recent times. It has been suggested by critics like Ashis Nandy that audience behaviour and their relationship to the image within the domain of popular cinema can be analysed as manifestations of a resistance to or disengagement from the demands of post independence modernity.¹

In spite of belonging to different critical positions Ashis Nandy's and Ashish Rajadhyaksha's arguments have certain similarities in this context, although what is described by the former as psychological trauma is translated by the latter into political terms. Rajadhyaksha argues — 'the resistance that the Indian film spectator puts up to what has been called the Hollywood mode of production also extends to or certainly inform Indian cinema's own resistance to turning into a properly capitalist industry.'² This kind of model gives way to further speculations about Indian cinema's constitution of 'not yet citizens' and the modern or modernist-realist mode of address which constitutes spectators as fully formed citizen subjects. According to Rajadhyaksha, cinema of a certain kind functions as a site of 'interpellation' where a symbolic operation of modernisation produces subjects for a modern nation state. He argues that — 'in Indian cinema realism performs not only a pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of society - one that involves tutoring people in the protocols of how to see films as fully formed members of civil society see them — but as an extension of this function, also works on behalf of the state, as the dominant overseer of the narrative contract of the cinema as a whole.'³

In the rest of his article he attempts to show how the phenomenon of subjection described above operates, by directly translating into the realm of cinema Partha Chatterjee's argument about how the Indian State apparatus interpellates citizen subjects through a process of 'double constitution'. Evidently, in Rajadhyaksha's scheme the narrator is an official agent who facilitates the process of subjection by manipulation and management of the relay of looks involved in the cinematic experience. He conjectures a differential emphasis on the third and first two looks rather than an appropriation of the first two looks by the third look as Laura Mulvey has suggested.⁴

Rajadhyaksha's arguments assume, firstly, that the concepts of political theory which he has borrowed from scholars such as Partha Chatterjee or Sudipta Kaviraj, can sufficiently explain the problems of spectatorship in Indian cinema, in which case cinema studies as a separate practice becomes superfluous. Secondly, his categorisation of

spectators overlooks the fact that a considerable section of the audience of popular cinema happen to be middle or upper middle class citizens who are related to modern professions and may exhibit so called refined sensibilities in other cultural arenas. The fact that a part of this section may also be the audience of 'classical narrative' films from Hollywood or even Indian realist films, further complicates the situation. Thirdly, the assumption that cinema operates as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) in the same sense that a school or family does is a notion that I find extremely problematic.

I would like to argue that cinema in India does not function so much as a site of subject formation but rather as a sort of public sphere where a hetero-social collectivity ritualistically negotiate certain issues regarding their subjectivities and desires. By saying that I do not intend to deny the ideological import of the cinematic institution but rather wish to point out that such ideological processes are more heterogeneous and complex than is generally assumed. The construction of subjectivity and articulation of desires are immensely complicated and painful processes that are effected by other Repressive or Ideological State Apparatuses like school, religious institutions, legal units etc. These processes are almost always accompanied by a degree of coercion and impulsive resistance to them. Thus, memories of school days are most often associated with 'partisan' activities like bunking classes, counter disciplinary acts, caricatures of teachers etc. all of which offer some kind of resistance to the tutoring project. Memories of cinema on the other hand, clearly reflect a more personal love-hate relationship with the medium. One is reminded of the depressed and suicidal Woody Allen, who, tormented by the 'angst' of modern existence, goes to the cinema hall and comes out resolving that life might be after all worth living at least for these beautiful movies. Cinema is the realm where we make sense of our subjectivities in various ways. This function of the cinematic institution has taken up a more significant meaning in India during the post-independence era where the postcolonial subject had to encounter a model of modernity which was literally imposed on her/ him. Under such conditions where various social, cultural traditions and sensibilities belonging to different orders co-exist in the same time and space, the human subject is bound to harbour excess of divisions within itself. Thus the binary opposition between irrational, pre-modern, 'not yet citizen' spectators and modernized, rational, 'fully formed citizen' spectators is purely imaginary as both categories co-exist in an Indian spectator, albeit with variations in degree.

The cinematic negotiations are based on narrative contracts which differ in case of popular and realist films. In my scheme, the term 'narrative contract' refers to the complex set of relationships and demands between the spectatorial look, narrator and the body of the film text. In order to explain the functioning of such contracts in Indian cinema I will take Yash Chopra's *Silsila* (1981) as an example of the popular genre and Satyajit Ray's *Pikoo* (1980) as an example of the realist genre, because in their own ways both films deal with the theme of adultery and would warrant a comparison.

But first it must be pointed out that no spectator donates the look entirely in any filmic experience. The look is split and a part of it is retained by the spectator, the part through which s/ he confers meaning upon the text, by drawing from her/ his psycho-social history, intertextual knowledge or perceptual, cognitive activities. At this level

each spectator encounters a slightly different version of the text and therefore all reception are partly negotiated ones which resist any unproblematic tutoring.

In the domain of popular cinema the donation of the spectatorial look is somewhat analogous to donation of my body to a giant wheel or carousel operator at a fairground. The spectator assumes that the narrator, like the carousel operator, is aware of her/ his needs and desires so as to readily confer upon her/ him the pleasures that are sought. To the extent such demands remain unsatisfied there is the much feared audience resentment and probability of box office failures, much like the resentful shouts of the people demanding more speed at a carousel. But to make sense of one's desire is also to be aware of the lacks that have given birth to it. Thus the hedonistic service demanded by the spectators presupposes an exposure of the various levels of subjectivities so that their conflicting desires can be simultaneously addressed and satisfied. One of the major pleasures that a film like *Silsila* (1981) offers is the voyeuristic intrusion into the private space of the stars Amitabh Bacchan and Rekha, who were allegedly having a real life affair at that time. Thus at the same time they feature as real life figures and as diegetic characters. The fact that their adulterous but romantic escapade is a major attraction and source of pleasure in the film is proved by the immense popularity and autonomous circulation of the Amitabh-Rekha song sequences in both audio tapes and television. On the other hand, the romantic episode is also a source of threat or irritation for a conflicting desire that seeks to see the couples legitimately restored. The final resolution and restoration of legitimate couples exhibit a clear acknowledgement of this conservative desire. Such a heterogeneous mode of address clearly suggests that the text posits its spectators as split up into multiple subjectivities rather than a coherent autonomous subject. There is in fact as little logical connection between these conflicted desires as there is within the conflicted subjectivities that the spectators are marked by. Popular film texts in such a situation provide a possibility of coming to terms with oneself. Thus popular cinema nurtures desire 'to make the other look at me from the position that I see myself'. It is to be noted that giving a privileged access to one's self is a condition of informal relations based on love rather than a formal, impersonal negotiation where one tends to foreground one identity over others. The pressing need to make sense of one's identity has nurtured popular cinema over the years. But the same viewing context which can become naturalized to a certain section of the audience, could prove to be quite ambiguous and traumatic to other sections or social classes whose identities have been constructed in different terms outside the cinema. The various apparatuses of the modern state tend to posit and construct the individual as an autonomous subject, a coherent entity working within a rational, secular paradigm. I remember an incident from my schooldays where one of our teachers, after a disastrous examination performance had exclaimed — 'we're trying to make managers who'll be wearing ties, not clerks.' In other words, the institution was trying to produce makers of decision, creators of meaning whose social mobility is directly proportional to the amount of responsibility they are able to undertake or the amount of centrality their gaze is able to assume. The need to stitch the self into a coherent whole thus becomes far more pressing for Indian middle or upper middle class citizens who are posited as repositories of modern values. Popular cinema presents to these classes an ambiguous space where they can come to terms with their selves as they see it while simultaneously posing a

threat to the identity imposed by the other, which they are always already struggling to put into place. I can remember innumerable instances where various elements of popular films, for example, the hero performing superhuman feats, are enjoyed emphatically and reduced to objects of ridicule or jokes once the film is over. Such examples illustrate a disavowal of one's own desire in order to maintain the illusion of a rational identity. Thus I would like to argue that 'realism' in the Indian context can be read in one sense as the desire of a certain class to 'make sense to the other' rather than 'being made sense of by the other'. The tension between Asim and Aparna in Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1969) could serve as a suitable analogy to illustrate the situation. Asim's attraction towards Aparna partly owes to his desire to make sense of her, while he feels threatened by Aparna's castrating look that tries to make sense of his desires and the patriarchal framework within which they operate.

One of the primary aspects of the majority of realist films is that they are in a certain sense 'yet to be resolved'. In other words, they harbour a lack which is to be filled in by the critical insight from the spectator. Rajadhyaksha rightly points out that such texts put the spectator in a judgmental position in relation to the problem displayed. In so far as this is done the spectators are treated as rational, responsible agents who are worthy of being placed in a higher epistemic order from where they can execute their critical look upon subordinate objects. The narrative contract demands the spectator to donate their look on condition that it shall be returned to them in an enhanced fashion. This enhancement is epistemic in nature and is mediated by critical insights from the narrator, as a part of the contract. The narrator in this case assumes a role analogous to that of a teacher in a modern university who operates on the basis of epistemic hierarchy and academic excellence authenticated by the state apparatus. The teacher displays a problem with personal critical inputs and consequently hands it over to the student who is expected to take up her/ his position in relation to the problem.

In Satyajit Ray's *Pikoo* (1982) the adulterous relation serves neither as an objective spectacle nor simply as a threat which has to be resolved. The text tries to investigate how articulation of certain liberal desires can prove to be traumatic for a Bengali housewife who operates within a paradigm where the ties with conservative traditions have not yet been severed. The relationship is problematised by incorporating point of view shots of the child and of the ailing grandfather with whom we are invited to identify at certain points. In the realist tradition the text operates by displaying a problem through a method of description and instead of offering a moral resolution, the enriched spectatorial look is handed over to the spectator through the symbolic operation of the pensive backtrack at the final shot where *Pikoo* is seen to be sitting in an armchair. The freeze frames at the end of Ray's *Charulaya* (1964) or *Pratidwandi* (1971) or the meticulous contemplative feat performed by the camera at the final long take of the boy in Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988), act as sites where transfer of agency between the narrator and the spectator is effected.

Such shots and sequences in many realist texts directly address and expose the look of the spectator, for whom the problem has been displayed with so much effort. It is precisely the point where the narrator ends his descriptive discourse and the spectator

begins his contemplative, critical discourse. In this sense realism in Indian cinema has a frontal aspect where the second look (i.e. the look of the spectator at the screen) figures as a major constitutive component. In Indian cinema it is very difficult to dissolve the narratorial and spectatorial positions as Christian Metz had suggested in the context of Hollywood realism.⁵ The democratic demands of the second look in Indian cinema is a phenomenon that has to be given its due attention in film theory. Given this kind of a theoretical framework I would like to rephrase Ashish Rajadhyaksha's question 'what does the cinema make of me?' to a more relevant question — 'what do I make of myself at the cinema?'

Thus in my framework realism nurtures the 'desire to look at myself from a position from which the other sees me'. In the situation I have described, realism as a mode of critique has to face an inherent problem. The reception site of realist texts are liable to be infested by pre-given meanings which can function as an impediment to its project. In the contemporary context aggressive separatist tendencies have severely threatened the centralised modern look of a higher epistemic order. There have been efforts to disacknowledge this look to form autonomous, local self-definitions. Under such conditions the realist mode of film practice has become a site for a symbolic reassertion of the threatened power or authority. Secondly, if the project of realism is to mobilise a change in consciousness, it is inevitably prone to failure. The pleasure of realism is not so much voyeuristic as it is intellectual in nature. Thus the problems posed are most often disavowed by a fetishisation of the sense of authority or judgmental power that such a form bestows on its spectator. Perhaps one can again draw an analogy from the Asim-Aparna relationship in *Aranyer Din Ratri*. Aparna is apparently aware of the patriarchal mechanism that nurtures Asim's desire for her. But alongside the subtle hints that she can see through Asim, Aparna simultaneously invites the male gaze and even enjoys her subjection. In his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek discusses the theory of ideology of German scholar Peter Sloterdijk. The latter argues that we are living in a post-ideological society where the subject is aware of the distance between ideological mask and reality, but still insists on wearing the mask.⁶ Rephrasing the Asim-Aparna relationship in Žižek's terminology we could say that 'Aparna knows very well how things are but still acts as if she does not know. Similarly, the spectator is not unaware of real problems, s/he knows how things are, but in so far as s/he takes up the spectatorial position s/he acts as if s/he does not know, so that s/he can re-experience the critical freedom bestowed upon her/him. In contemporary socio-political situation, so long as one's sense of individual freedom remains intact one ceases to exercise it. Freedom has become an end in itself.

I would like to end by pointing out that the use of cinematic medium as an instrument of socio-political critique should require an understanding and critical awareness of its reception and circulation contexts. Any effective critique primarily requires a breakdown of the spectatorial pleasures that I had been discussing so far. In this context one could perhaps turn to the films of Ritwik Kumar Ghatak where the spectators are denied their privileged position and the spectatorial look comes under assault at various levels.

[This article would not have been possible without the thought-provoking classroom discussions with Ashish Rajadhyaksha and M. Madhava Prasad, which I had the privilege of attending as a student in 1999. I would like to thank our teacher Moinak Biswas for critical comments on early drafts of this article. Finally, I am deeply obliged to all my teachers at the Department of Film Studies.]

References:

1. Chidananda Das Gupta, *The Painted Face*, Rdtv Books, New Delhi, 1991. For Ashis Nandy's arguments, see 'An Intelligent Film Critics Guide to Indian Cinema' in Ashis Nandy, *The Savage Freud and Other Essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995. For a brief critical discussion of Das Gupta's and Nandy's positions and a more complex elaboration of spectatorship in the Indian context, see Ravi S. Vasudevan, 'Addressing the Spectator of a "Third World" National Cinema: The Bombay "Social" Film of the 1940s and 1950s', *Screen*, 36/4, 1995.
2. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'Who's Looking? Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema', *Cultural Dynamics*, 10/2, 1998.
3. Ibid.
4. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Bill Nichols ed. *Movies and Methods* vol. 2, Seagull Books Private Limited, Calcutta, 1993.
5. Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, Macmillan, London, 1982.
6. Slavoj Zizek, 'How did Marx Invent the Symptom?' In Zizek, ed. *Mapping Ideology*, Verso, London, 1994. For an unabridged version see Zizek, *The Sublime Object Of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1988.

* Postgraduate student (1998- 2000).