

Editorial Note

JMI 3 collects the papers presented at the third symposium hosted by the Department on the occasion of Professor Laura Mulvey's visit in September, 2003. We decided to give the symposium an ambitious even though slightly old-fashioned title, 'Encountering Theory: Three Decades of the Humanities Experiment? The idea was to reflect back on the impact and assimilation of Theory in the Indian humanities, which has decisively re-defined its programmes and redrawn its internal boundaries. Since Film Studies owes a direct debt to that intellectual ferment of the 1960s and 70s we thought it could well provide a privileged space for a retrospective survey. A rethinking of film theory could serve as a point of departure for a stock taking of the experience in the humanities in general. We sought presentations from colleagues in English, Comparative Literature, Philosophy, History and Women's Studies, asking them to look back at Theory from its now visible margins. Their contributions form the second section of this collection. Essays addressing film and film studies are put in the first section.

Laura Mulvey, one of the most widely read theorists in Film Studies curricula, represents the moment of Theory in more than one way, having worked at the conjuncture of semiotics, psychoanalysis and feminism — the three principal critical currents of the seventies. She presents a retrospection here, usefully outlining the context of the emergence of Theory and indicating at least one new direction of critical departure now that that context is historically placed at a remove. Ashish Rajadhyaksha, a foremost theoretician of Indian cinema, characterizes the changed context in terms of a movement away from the text — a movement that he thinks is not only a critical option but is embodied in the current phenomenon of Bollywood itself. The dissolution of the film text into mediatic-economic effects, into sites of consumption sometimes unconnected with the Elm as such, renders the models of textual/ formal interpretation inherited from the seventies irrelevant. Rajadhyaksha's approach is connected to another moment of Theory, the turn heralded by the second phase Cultural Studies, where reception replaced production as the primary site of theorization. His essay also points to the other ambition of Indian film studies - to do political theory using the phenomenon of cinema as a prism. Rajadhyaksha proposes an investigation of the character of the Indian state in a situation where Bollywood is working towards a dissolution of the ties between the state and cinema in India. To the extent that he takes recourse to analyses of the image he does, however, use the interpretative tools developed in the semiotic traditions. My own short piece suggests the continuing utility of such tools for an understanding of historical phases of cinema. It tests a central concept developed by Mulvey against Indian films from the 1950s.

Mihir Bhattacharya sounds a despondent note: a cultural history of the reception of a film like Hitchcock's *Psycho*, he argues, would point to the gross inadequacy, even to the ideological complicity, of the film theory that grew out of investigation of Hollywood forms. Studying popular forms, he goes on to suggest, has been unproductive and mystifying. His is also a critique of 'western' modes in general, against which he upholds a local modernist version of minority filmmaking and critical practice. Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay's essay on the poetry of Baudelaire and Jibanananda re-affirms

modernism in a different way — not by positing a difference with the west, but by arguing for a common understanding of modernity as a set of impulses that connect the two different times and spaces in question. The critic who exemplifies this bridging of “situations” for him is Walter Benjamin. The visual drive discovered by Benjamin in connection with the Paris arcades and the practice of flânerie serves as a model universal of sorts for Mukhopadhyay as he looks at the globally distributed drives of modernity.

While Theory derived its conceptual wherewithal from continental philosophy particularly of the French variety, departments of Philosophy have generally guarded themselves against the invasion. It was literature and the social sciences where the new philosophy took roots, with attendant diffusion, even dilution of concepts. Shefali Moitra outlines the resistance to Theory shown by academic philosophy in India locating it in the continuing commitment of the latter to analytic philosophy, in a particular division of labour between studying Western and Indian philosophies, and in the more general pedagogic orientation of the discipline. Supriya Chaudhuri’s essay demonstrates how the literary scholar can address such divides creatively. Chaudhuri considers the afterlife of the subject, a central target of the anti-humanist Theory; looking at the continuing engagement with the questions of the self and person in contemporary analytic philosophy and other disciplines, and shows how acts of literature help re-configure the very object of such inquiries. Santanu Biswas focuses on one crucial component of Theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis - now facing serious objection from revisionist French as well as Anglophone critics as the most problematic inheritance of the seventies. Biswas raises a simple question, can we know if we have exhausted Lacan in literary criticism unless we have known him properly in the first place? Apart from the question of unfinished publication, Biswas also touches upon a basic contention regarding Theory: has the eclectic assimilation of concepts developed in disciplines of traditional into fields of cultural investigation resulted in a loss of definition? Biswas suggest that the mistakes of Lacanian literary criticism might stem from the de-linking of his ideas from their original clinical context.

Feminism has arguably been the most productive area of assimilation of Theory in the Indian academia in the sense that it is here that Indian scholars have made substantial contribution to Theory. A primary reason is that intellectual inquiry did not cut itself off from activism in this case. Success has also been significant in institution building - if one considers the emergence of Women’s Studies programmes across the country over the last two decades. We asked four feminist scholars representing two generations to exchange their views on the state of feminist theory in India. The proceedings of the panel are published here almost unaltered. We cannot, however, reproduce the speech that Laura Mulvey gave as the principal respondent to the panel. It has been a major lapse on our part to fail to keep a record of it.

It is also a matter of great regret that we cannot carry Gautam Bhadra’s paper, which concluded the symposium. Bhadra, a leading representative of the new school of historiography that emerged in the wake of Theory, presented a characteristically provocative defence of the theoretical turn in history-writing by citing examples where a literary or philosophical impulse has posed challenges to the rules of writing. One

example he gave was that of the concept of the 'time-knot', suggested by such historians as D.D Kosambi and Ranajit Guha. He showed how such a concept forces the historian to rethink his craft, brings the truth-value of his statements into question.

JMI has established the practice of bringing out research papers by students and young scholars associated with the Department. Anindya Sengupta's essay on Ritwik Ghatak is a revised section from his MA Dissertation, submitted in the Department in 2001.

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