

## THEORY AND TOLERANCE

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### *Conditions of Reading*

Take a film like *Psycho*. Released in 1960 in the US, and globally accessible shortly afterwards, it created a sensation among its first spectators; and that delicious *frisson* of shock and fright which its initial reception demanded has remained part of the experience of the film ever since. The shower murder and its prolegomena, a stolen peep at a woman undressing, have attracted much commentary; I am, however, concerned with differing looks at this look. The voyeur is born, runs the customary assumption; patriarchy is in the order of things. On the other hand, if you assume that a voyeur is made, which incidentally is a theoretically viable proposition, you end up by invoking history. This paper is an attempt at such invocations.

I had not seen *Psycho* at its first release in Kolkata (Calcutta then), though a good many people I knew had done so. When I heard of the sensational film for the first time from friends and classmates, I was not sure what a psycho was; one knew that it had something to do with abnormal states of mind, possibly sexual and connected to Freud, but a college-going teenager in the late fifties would not normally know about psychopaths, let alone its contraction, of American rather than British provenance, into *Psycho*. This use is dated by the *Shorter Oxford* (1993 edition) from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998, says it is from the thirties. Psychopath comes into general use from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Shorter Oxford* again). Under normal conditions in the English-speaking countries, this is a relatively new word in the fifties, coming as it did from a suspiciously new fangled and unfathomable discipline, be it Psychiatry or Psychoanalysis. But the idea of submerged mental forces, of involuntary drives and compulsive patterns of behaviour, was getting accepted and detached from considerations of morality. The rational, integrated, fully responsible individual was giving ground to the de-centred, fragile, constructed subject. In India, the approach to states of mind was still largely traditional even in the thin

stratum of the Anglophone elite, one part of which was the relatively large body of the ordinary middle class who had to learn enough English to get by in the colonial world of minor white-collar professions. They did not have to steep themselves in the commonly accepted currency of western ways of thinking. One must remember that in India in general, and Bengal in particular, this category produced the intelligentsia and the nationalist political leadership, for which a specifically modernist but *Indian* training was needed. The western component in these technologies of the self was generally filtered through an accessibility time-lag and therefore a reconstructive hiatus. The avant-garde-academics and authors had of course been familiar with Freud for quite some time, but the intrusion of quasi-technical terms of abnormal psychology into ordinary parlance, acceptable to the educated Middle-class, had not yet taken place. Abnormal states would still probably be fitted into a consensual mysticism or the older schema of the six *ripus* ('enemies') – *kama* lust, *krodha* anger, *lobha* greed, *moha* delusion, *mada* pride, *matsarya* envy – and categorized as vices, and the deviant would be invested with full agency for his actions. Therefore the person recognized in the west as a psychopath — and his doings — would not have a generally accepted 'technical' understanding; the normalization of the 'abnormal' would still have to wait. The film-goer in Kolkata in the early sixties was therefore entering the cinema-hall with expectations and attitudes quite different from those of the typical western viewer. This is of course a convenient generalization, because there is no 'typical' viewer as such, eastern or western, only approximation to historical possibilities of viewing.

The title is only one of the gatekeepers which man the portals to reading. The text of *Psycho*, like any other text which comes from Hollywood or any other western film-making centre, offers various grades of puzzles and enigmas to the non-western viewer. Some of the estrangement-markers are specific to the material culture of America and easy to bracket in the viewing experience: driving on the right, makes of cars, interiors of homes and offices, building and public places, the highway, landscape, the motel, the private eye, policemen and officials, dress and accent. These form a cluster in the *proairetic* code of text formation, and without these the narrative will lose its effect of the thickness of life. In the context of the home market, these are the reassuring signatures of

the normally visible, put in place almost by routine, made to serve an essential narrative demand for the quotidian. This is of course a reconstruction, constituted dynamically into a sacred consensus by countless film-makers in unbroken succession, assumed as an imaginary common to all specular demands for verisimilitude. The American viewer will no doubt consider this cluster of *mise-en-scene* effects to be a part of the deal with the film-maker: the Western will foreground particular kinds of landscape, buildings, costumes, dialogue and guns and things, whereas the film noir will bring in different kinds of interior, exterior characters, clothes and speeches. The exigencies of genre will make sure that the particular codes are honoured either in the breach or the observance. From the reception side, then, the desire for the comfort of commonplaces counterbalances the other desire for the unfamiliar, the arcane, the startling. And since more or less the same effects occur in representations all over the place, meaning that factual and fictional interact, merge and diverge, the film-goer's non-filmic world would be similarly reconstructed, creating an easy and ready way to validate and valorise the filmic. Or rather, the ways of seeing in general can be viewed as performative injunctions determined by representational categories which include the dynamic, ever-mutating, specialized techniques marked off as fictional.

The *proairetic* cluster in a Hollywood text, generating much of the subset of ordinary action which keeps the narrative going, does not bother the non-American, even the third-world, viewer too much. Apart from the ubiquity of representations of American life and institutions (of which more later), a certain receptivity to other cultures has marked most historical societies, except perhaps the geographically isolated. One assumes without thinking that modes of travel in America would be cars keeping to the right-hand side of the street, that shopping would be done in very large emporia called supermarkets, that policemen and criminals and even ordinary citizens would carry guns, that bars and nightclubs would be major venues for social gatherings, that women would wear make-up all the time and expose a good deal of the erotically marked regions of the body, that much of the interpersonal communication would take place over the telephone, and so on. A great many people would have access to this part of the cognitive and cultural capital, circulating across regions and countries, which accumulates over a long

period of time with resources from various quarters: media, literature, learned discourses, film, word of mouth. This is the easy part. What is not so easy to make sense of would be the more interior matters of the mind: what makes somebody tick and how she organizes her life and what propels him towards one course of action rather than another, and so forth. Take, for instance, children. On the American screen, the common way of relating to them seems to be to slot them into the way the parents or parent would organize life over the day, the month, the year. The purpose of living is to go after jobs, money, pleasure, love, ambition, etc., and children often interfere with the pursuit of these goals, and have to be managed and kept out of the way. This is not at all a denial of the reality of parental affection. But anyone who comes from a culture where the life of parents is demonstrably organized round the needs and demands of the children would be puzzled by some of the ways in which children are trained to be exiles from parental life, and therefore overtly hostile to parents, in American films. Or, take romantic love. In many cultures even today the course of true love, assumed to be a compact between freely-thinking, freely-moving subjects, is perceived to be threatened largely by externalities of one kind or another. Traditional stories (folktales and ballads) as well as modern novels in Bangla, for instance, would offer this tribute to the ideological status of romantic love; one can still see this sometimes in crude reversions as in *Titanic* (1997), in which it is initially social status and then a natural catastrophe which brings tragedy. But the construction of romance in Hollywood commonly looks into the recesses of subjective motivation in order to signal impediments and complexities. Lives are seen to have separate trajectories, internally mapped out by the protagonists; love is a break generated at the point of accidental, intersection, and till a course of sentimental education (for either or both) takes care of the glitches of separate proclivities, it would lie bleeding from frequent skirmishes. A certain kind of worldliness, traceable to possessive individualism, seems to determine the logic of passion. These are the points where the reconstructive surgery of reading comes in. The submerged estrangement-markers turn out to be the major ingredients in the exoticization and spectacularity of Hollywood in 'third-world countries. Literally rich and strange, America onscreen may be familiar to certain audiences only in various exotic avatars. It demands receptive tolerance of a kind.

Even when the viewer comes relatively fresh to the ways of America, she can make sense of what she sees with the aid of the cognitive tolerance which older cultures have always encouraged in ordinary participants. I am tempted to offer a recent example. There is a community of folk painters in the western part of West Bengal in India, known as *patuas*, who eke out a meagre living even today by painting narrative scrolls and singing out the legendary stories of the pictures in a performative setting. Since this calling has now fallen into relative desuetude, they have taken to painting self-contained rectangular pictures on paper, often with a traditional narrative content, but sometimes innovating with topical motifs. Their world opens out, easily overcoming the conservative binds on their craft. A young woman, Hajra Chitrakar, from Naya in Pashchim Medinipur, had recently painted several scrolls depicting the fall of the towers of the World Trade Centre on 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2001. She is barely literate and neither a newspaper-reader nor a frequent TV-watcher, but she moves around, like most of her kind, and has managed to pick up some of the salient points about 9/11. She thinks that the WTC was the tallest building in the world and knows that it was toppled to the ground by planes ramming into it and that it was the doing of Arabs. The narrative is vertically organized, the story moving on as the scroll unfolds in her hand; but the technique is traditionally non-linear, and the imaging non-perspectival in the western sense, so that each separate segment of the drama is invested with a frontality not usually available in realist western art. A group of these rural artists had come to a workshop in Kolkata in the third week of February, 2004, and they were trying out various innovations to expand their market. Some, including Hajra, were making designer T-shirts and I promptly asked her to make me one with the twin towers toppling down. This was duly done. The painting is in red, brown, yellow and green, and the very dark shades which they affect these days, particularly the blue, are avoided, along with the usual crowding together of things and creatures which normally seem to thrust themselves out from the flat surface; the effect, on the T-shirt is dramatic and terse, but neither melodramatic nor festive, possibly because of the perceived gravity of the event. Hajra shows the broken top of the left tower leaning across the sky and a very large flying object about to ram into it. It is shaped like a fish with wings, has a massive human head with a vaguely Arabic-looking headdress, a fierce moustache and eyes which are proud and exulting, as

though announcing a mission accomplished. Two other planes look like small flying fish without any recognizable human attribute. The artist was evasive about the identity of the figurehead, but one suspects that Osama bin Laden, who has become something of a folk hero among poor Muslims almost everywhere, was intended as the fierce destroyer of America's lofty eminence. A miracle is structured into the morality play which 9/11 turns out to be; pride surely hath its fall.

This brings up one of the problems I wish to tackle in this paper. It is commonplace these days but nevertheless entirely meaningful to say that much of the textual work gets done at the reception end and that a specific reconfiguration of any given text is a construction done within the parameters which govern the conditions under which such work is possible in any given culture or community or group. Hajra's representation of 9/11 involves a view of America which is the result of specific kinds of work, physical and mental, done by her as a woman, a low-status person, a poor propertyless villager, a Muslim and an artist with a particular bundle of traditional skills appropriate to themes and conventions prevailing in the subset of the culture she belongs to. All that is fine, but it is only half the story. This is a liberationist proposition which assumes the equality of all readers, much like the equality of all worshippers under Protestantism or the equality of all citizens under Bourgeois democracy. Unfortunately, the former turns out to be as much a myth as the latter. Hajra's reading of 9/11 appears to be strong and legitimate only in isolation; if she had access to Hollywood and the TV channels and neo-colonial education and fashionable commodities, the story might have been vastly different. It might have broken down. Her glorification of Laden is as much defenceless and poverty-stricken as the German peasants' evocation of God in 1525 or the Chartists' reliance on the British Parliament in 1848. This poverty of Hajra's romanticism is the other side of the media-saturated emptiness in the heart of developed capitalism, in which working people vote for Reagan and Thatcher on frankly reactionary platforms and the ratings of the Bush-Blair duo go up after their brutalities in Iraq. Reading positions are always different, and the specificities of this difference have to be theoretically respected, but not all differences are necessarily critical.

### *Situating the Viewer*

Take a film like *Psycho* again. This time too, the differences in reading are situational, though not necessarily impoverished. I am now talking of people who had moved up by a familiar process of educating themselves step by step. It happens a lot in third-world countries. High class education was cheap for clever and hard-working young people and the world was at their doorstep. I had not seen *Psycho* at its first release in Kolkata, as I had said earlier, though Hollywood was quite familiar to educated Bengali youth. There were cinemas at the city centre — Metro, Lighthouse, New Empire, Globe, Elite, Tiger — which showed only English films and mostly Hollywood. The bigger houses were air-conditioned and a delicious cold whiff came your way as you passed by. Talkie Show House in north Kolkata showed second releases and was immensely popular. Morning shows in many cinemas made a reasonable profit out of elderly re-runs of Hollywood. Throughout the nineteen fifties and the early sixties — my years in school and university — the city centre was an anglicized *locus amoenus*, full of shops restaurants, cinemas, hotels, clubs, mansions; the streets were wider and cleaner, the lights brighter, the cars bigger and sleeker, the pavements shaded by wide balconies, the cool breeze from the Ganga flowing straight across the immense green of the Maidan. Anyone coming from the north or south — particularly the north where settled middle-class Bengalis had lived for generations — would feel the difference. If you had money and the poise that goes with it, you would probably experience the very peak of your social privilege with a meal at Firpo's, shopping at Park Street, a film show at the Metro, a drive around the Maidan. There was still a sizable white population at Kolkata in the fifties, mostly British, and connected with trade and industry; they lived a life apart, and though the metropolitan Indian elite — in business, in the bureaucracy and in the higher professions — had penetrated the imperial order under colonial rule itself, and though Indians (non-Bengali) were gradually taking over the heart of the city, the colorocracy was still on show in postcolonial Kolkata. The spectatorial white still contained a goodly measure of the trace of managerial white and hegemonic white. Important business concerns and plantations were in British hands; some property in plum locations were owned by white people. Posh hotels and restaurants still demanded dinner/ lounge dress

for right of entry on gala nights, though 'national' had started appearing after another oblique. I remember going to New Empire (which doubled as a theatre / concert hall) in the late fifties for live concerts of western classical music; more than half the people were white and in proper evening dress. Latecomers were politely gliding to their seats with a prior 'sorry' and a posterior 'thank you' for every seated figure they crossed. Light glittered on gold and diamond and invited your gaze to lovely expanses of dazzling white bosoms and arms. Not that you loved Mozart less for all these distractions, but the experience of music is framed by a felt lack of entitlement. Black skin, awkward English, baggy trousers and hand-me-down jumper, getting off a no. 3 bus from Maniktala and dodging limousines with diplomatic number plates on your way in, the price of a ticket taking away half of your scholarship money for the month — these exterior overtures marked one's entry into the world of concertos and fugues.

But then classical music had always been the preserve of the elite; both the price of entry and the listening skill are carefully acquired capital. In the case of films the demands are much less. One could get into the front stalls of the 'English' cinemas for ten annas, which was ten sixteenths of a rupee. This of course involved a long queue and much skill in jostling, pushing and even fisticuffs. One rupee four annas gave you the privilege of a reserved seat in the middle stalls. In the 'Bengali' and 'Hindi' cinemas the price of a ticket would start from six and a half annas, and four annas would suffice for the suburban cinemas. Prices had to be kept low in a depressed economy. Bengal had been made a poor part of India — itself a reservoir of poverty for a very long time — through the systematic operation of colonial rule over nearly two centuries, and at the time we are talking about, immediately after independence, it was reeling after a series of large scale disasters, all man-made, all caused by political decisions taken by outsiders: the famine of 1943, ruthlessly and cynically manufactured by the colonial government gathering up resources for the prosecution of its part in the inter-imperial war; the splitting of Bengal into two parts in two separate countries in 1947 with the coming of independence, decided by politics leaders in league with the British government; the Hindu-Muslim riots before and after the partition, deliberately provoked by sub-continental vested interests; the consequent influx of Hindu refugees into West Bengal,

probably the largest and the longest migration in recent history. All this put intolerable pressure on the fragile economic and social fabric of West Bengal, especially Kolkata. Living was very hard. Middle class families and those who were lower down had to depend upon subsidized rice, wheat, sugar and kerosene from ration shops for their daily needs. Jobs were scarce. Pay was low. Investment was moving away from this region because the political leadership in New Delhi had decided to equalize the freight of steel and coal all over the country so that eastern India might lose its locational advantage; the license-and-permit raj of the bureaucracy-politician nexus favoured other regions for investment. Things were pretty bad in this part of the world. (The experience of cinema in the fifties of Kolkata demands therefore a perspective of unquiet times and grinding hardship for the educated Hindu middle class whose patronage sustained the English and Bangla films).

As for symbolic capital, the visual image provided enough coded clues to compensate for insufficiency of linguistic skills. I still find that I don't follow more than half of what is being said in a Hollywood film, and I have a feeling that it does not detract much from an adequate response to whatever the film should convey. In going to an English film in the late fifties or early sixties, you crossed a few thresholds — both physical and ideological — but the route was there, well mapped out and traversed by feet much like your own. But the experience was still tinged with a touch of the exotic and the unfamiliar. From what I have been able to gather from those — from the ranks the educated Bengali middle class — who saw *Psycho* on its opening in Kolkata, the shower murder sent a shiver up your spine, but the rest did not impress a great deal. The whole business of mother-fixation seemed very remote, the 'psycho-analytic' explanation at the end obfuscating the motivation (which the old fox, Hitchcock, had no doubt intended); the typical American institutions — motels, highways, policemen, private detectives, possessive individualism, extra-marital sex and so on — were exotic and not wholly explicable. Many had puzzled over the motive of Marion, some had thought that she was stupid and sure to be caught, and almost all had felt that this film fitted into the familiar groove of murder and revenge, crime and punishment. Melodrama seems much more universal than murder-mystery or psycho-thriller. The Indian filmgoer had been used to

this narrative structure for quite some time: a crime is committed by a villain, an injustice is done to the innocent and not so innocent, violence is unleashed, but the balance of the moral universe is restored through the strengthening and mobilization of the forces of good, evil gets punished, and equilibrium is restored. The diegetic universe of *Psycho* needs, of course, a specific series of interpretative hypotheses. The American version of melodrama will need a global vision of American life. Where something sticks out as being inexplicable in terms of your familiar everyday life or indigenous systems of thought, you may assign it comfortably to the catch-all bin bag of Americanism or Occidentalism. Many non-white cultures have reacted with surprise — and fear — to the ways of the white people. The west had come to the east in search of loot and goods and markets and murdered and plundered its way through generations of more peaceable people, and in the process the larger parts of the world had been forced to learn the ways of the west, but this does not mean that the construction of the occident was wholly of occidental initiative. The colonized made sense of what came their way by their own understanding of what constituted the peculiar mores and rituals of western life.

### *Marketing Melodrama*

If you read *Psycho* as melodrama — and there is no reason why you should not — its pervasive and perpetual violence may be seen as motivated to a degree, as the Russian Formalists would put it. Realism of this kind is sustained by the assumption that crime and deceit and violence set up a normative scale of depth. The narrative proposes that journeys end in the meeting of victim and murderer, and that the more gruesome the violence, the more innovative the way of the killer, the more satisfaction will accrue to the viewer / reader. The representational naturalization of the transgressive became part of the package of vulgar realism (habitually called classic realism) fairly early, and transcended the generic boundaries of the gothic novel, the melodrama and the penny dreadful. *Psycho* follows the standard prescription. It starts with an illicit coupling of two ordinary people whose ordinariness is marked largely by greed and possessiveness. The action then starts rolling with a breach of trust, a very large theft. This is of course the hackneyed wherewithal of Hollywood potboilers. If you want action, put in a bank

robbery, preferably with violence. The implicit moralism of robbing the rich translates into the despoliations of institutions, with the peculiar American slant of anything goes if it makes you rich. The robbery series moves on expected lines, with impediments from nature and the state apparatus, and intersects coincidentally with the murder series, the trajectory of which has psychic origins in a distorted mother-son relationship. One would be justified in thinking that the representational apparatus in the standard or vulgar realist text legitimizes itself only by proposing a syntax of transgression and violence; to characterize American life you have to think of a normality of crime and conflict. The shower murder is deeply pleasurable because it makes a spectacle of — and thereby legitimizes — the punishment of the transgressive female. But the logic of spectacular violence often dispenses with the punishment motif. The dumb blonde is an extra. The Kolkata viewer of the early sixties was not being naive when she thought that the ways of the white people were peculiar and the boundaries she had marked on her way to the cinema signified the existence of normally inexplicable worlds.

It should cause no surprise that a simple postcolonial reading of *Psycho* is offered in a professed review of film theory. Recent film theory has precisely set itself the task of reading films like *Psycho* speak, of course, of western film theory and this is what gets into academic curricula and fills the pages of learned journals. I do not have access to Chilean or Chinese theoretical work, and their cinema is only a little more accessible than their thought. What I have in plenty is Hollywood, the recent crop showing in posh houses and the older vintage on TV channels as well as video. And I have easy access to great deal of theoretical matter which treats of films I have easy access to. This development has been particularly marked in the last four decades of the twentieth century. Why Hollywood sells is pretty well known. A large home market, immense funds, massive infrastructure, a strong pool of technical and human resources: its products sell abroad because no other film industry in the world can match its production and marketing costs. Hollywood also sells because Americanism is in fashion. The USA is the undoubted world leader in commodities; there is no reason why a cultural commodity like cinema should not follow the lead of toothpaste, shoe or soft drinks. And undoubtedly, one task of theory is to make sense of what is there. But though Hollywood

dominates, it has not been able to eliminate other kinds of cinema. What kind of theory is in place to tackle the other cinema? A brief look seems to be in order.

### *Intolerant Theory*

The western — and hegemonic — inflection of film theory (including television theory), which is often viewed these days as a subset of cultural theory, and has gained acceptance as an important manifestation of Theory as such, has been gravitating towards a particular terrain for its example as well as its legitimation. The French new wave had sought out Hollywood for particular attention in the nineteen fifties and sixties, but it was in the seventies that Theory really came to grips with ‘popular’ cinema. Two developments need attention, The more important one is the explosion in radical theory in the aftermath of the youth revolt in 1968. Its first phase was largely inspired by versions of structuralist Marxism, notably the one propagated by Louis Althusser. What is popularly known as Apparatus Theory in film studies was a direct consequence of positions opened up by Marxism of this kind; it saw Hollywood as the enemy, a commercial apparatus producing a textual one. It should be noted that though the campus often provided important venues for heated ideological as well as political battles, the academic establishment in Britain and America was not, at this stage, largely involved in the development and promotion theoretical initiatives. But what the campus revolts did manage to do all over Western Europe and America was to crack open the smooth facade of normal intellectual work in the humanities and social sciences and make academic establishment sit up and take notice. Waves of theory from the European continent Hooded Anglophone campuses all over the world and changed the structure of courses and the contents of learned discourses. New fields of study were rapidly developed and often eclipsed older disciplines. This is the second development which has deeply affected film studies and its chosen textual terrain.

*Psycho* fits easily into the demonology of the hard-faced radical structuralism of this time. Despite their liking for a kind of avant-garde cinema, which would destroy the textual positioning of the subject in the prison of ideology, the main effort of apparatus

theory was directed to the deconstruction of Hollywood entertainment (Jean-Louis Comolli and Jan Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', *Cahier du Cinema*, 1968; Jean Pierre Oudart, 'Cinema and Suture', *Cahiers*, 1969; Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', *Cahiers*, 1970; Cahiers Editors, 'Young Mr. Lincoln', *Cahiers*, 1972. )

Althusserian Marxism had met Lacanian psychoanalysis for the theoretical task, and it was not long before feminism entered the fray and started demonstrating the patriarchal agenda behind the construction of mainstream realist texts. Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 1975, remains the classic statement of the early feminist position. Looking back, it was a large-scale intellectual revolt, spreading outward from the campuses, and affecting the cultural life of many western nations deeply and permanently. The state apparatus and big business were on the backfoot because of deflationary pressures on the major economies; Vietnam and South Africa provided attractive radical causes for many besides Marxists; women's liberation, gay liberation and black power offered major platforms; dropping out was a serious option. Drugs often meant defiance of authoritarian norms. Clothes denoted a badge of alternative lifestyle. Communes sprang up all over the place. Sit-ins and demos punctuated the daily round of campus activities. It was in this heady atmosphere that the major contemporary canon of Western Marxism was founded: Althusser, Adorno, Benjamin, Habermas, Gramsci, Bakhtin, Raymond Williams. This was also the time when a shift towards culture became marked, one reason being the foregrounding of youth and its preoccupation with mass culture and mass consumption. The campus revolts did not do much to alter the course of western capitalism; in fact, its aftermath saw a prolonged period of state action on behalf of transnational capital and of armed intervention to preserve US global hegemony. But culture has been retained as a relatively autonomous site for the formation of subjects. The wheel has turned towards submission to the given and choices are determined by global operations of the market, but a notion of the 'popular' remains in place both in everyday life and in theoretical discourses. Hollywood has been a major player in this shift. *Psycho* fits admirably into the apparatus theory; it also demonstrates the construction of the patriarchal narrative,

which was ripped open by early feminist criticism. But a few turns later, such texts became the staple of a different set of theoretical operations.

*Cahiers du Cinema* and *Screen* had taken the lead in the deconstruction of Hollywood, and yet their preoccupation looks obsessive. The admiration for authorship had remained with the French, embracing the avant-garde as well as the popular; the line taken was that the Hollywood auteur — Hitchcock or Howard Hawks or Nicholas Ray produced unique texts which contradicted the values of big-budget studio products. Jean Douchet, in ‘Hitch and his Audience’ (*Cahiers du Cinema*, 113, Nov, 1960) ascribed a therapeutic value to Hitchcock’s seduction of the audience by triggering his hidden desires and then the sublimation of deep psychic agitations by the deployment of clear reason. The ambiguous relationship between apparatus theory and authorism persists throughout the seventies. *Screen* moves away from overt political positions and explores psycho-analysis and semiotics. Cultural materialism, which retained its links with Marxism, was much more interested in mass media, particularly television. Meanwhile, first in France and then in Britain and US, semiotics and structuralism had brought in new formal means for the analysis of narratives. Both, syntagmatic and paradigmatic studies found ample material in popular genres; Hollywood provided the justification for undertaking formal studies once again. The help obtained from Russian Formalism boosted enterprises of this kind, and narrative studies have thrived ever since. The writerly text obviously thwarts such work, while the readerly text, taken *en masse*, proves much more amenable.

### *The Pleasures of Post-structuralism*

Structuralism gave way to Post-Structuralism and both academic work and high journalism in the west got busy with the silenced, the repressed and the marginalized. The Enlightenment and high culture became the enemy, or at least, less interesting than the freshly re-discovered terrain of ‘popular’ culture. The resources of older systems of thought — Marxism and psychoanalysis, for instance — were mobilized to initiate lively debates on clusters of fresh texts: pop music, television, popular cinema, clothes,

sports, food and drink, thrillers, romances, travel, journalism, technology, speech. Gender became a major issue in academic discourse; race and class receded a little. Text, discourse, narrative, representation, identity, code, space, difference, etc., came in as important indices to the new set of disciplinary habits. Film Studies as a discipline, which spread with incredible speed across the North American continent and affected Europe as well, thrived on the new theoretical initiatives and Hollywood (with US television) was established as the major source of the classic popular. The emphasis shifted from how the text is constructed to how the text is read. Reading, these days, is viewed as differentiated, and though gender is still thought of as important, the sting of patriarchal construction has largely been put in brackets because of the supposition of the reader's autonomy and initiative, which unleashes a surge of creativity at the reception end, making the codes of construction less interesting than the codes of reading. Desire and pleasure stalk the terrain of intellectual work. This development has been viewed as the cultural turn under the aegis of postmodernism.

The pleasure-centred view of post-modern culture has been criticized on several grounds. A strong position — developed by Marxists among others — characterized this culture and its defense as a submission to mass consumption and its horrendous propagation by transnational capital in league with the imperial mission of globalization. Another useful line of argument — not much in evidence in the west — would be to interrogate the notion of the 'popular' from the point of view of people's culture or workers' culture. Some attempt has been made to tackle the phenomenon of early cinema from this point of view. But an important theoretical task remains relatively neglected, and that relates to issues of openness and tolerance. Recent theory is happy with large classes of homogeneous texts, even though the terrain is split into genres and sub-genres. This is due to the preference for discovering rules of language to tackling the complexity of parole. This preference is theoretically essential for both structuralism and post-structuralism, which seek codes of construction and codes of reception or reading, so that the object of enquiry shifts to cultural forms and cultural habits. This leaves a void in the heart of film theory which does not know how to tackle those texts which are constructed in clear violation of, or regardless of, the codes which go into the making of the 'popular'

text. One resource seems to be to jettison the accumulated furniture of recent theory and fall back upon old-fashioned textual analysis; the other would be to develop a historical poetics which would not ignore recent theoretical insights.

### *Reading as Work*

Now take a film like *Kanchenjunga* (1962). It does tell a story, in fact, several stories, but you would not know how to construct a *fabula* for each, or what possible use it could be to the viewer. Narrative functions are detectable in bits and pieces, but these meander in the dovetailed *syuzhet* with its inconclusive episodes. You can go some way with psychoanalysis, because there is a domineering father with a meek wife and two daughters, but you discover that the patriarch has been deftly historicized, and the law of the father made literal. And so it goes on with other ways of splitting the text open. One can go back in time a little and do a good solid study of characters and themes. These have yielded interesting results, but one has a suspicion that this approach will not address contemporary concerns. One cannot do a genre study because the film does not have identifiable generic markers. Authorship is more promising, but one has to identify some of the elements which go into the authorship basket. The point is to remember that in reading this text one is not going through it in order to assign it to a particular *langue*, and thus reach the collective unconscious or the cultural codes or the invariant order of narrative syntax. Its *parole* draws constant attention to itself and invites the reader to work towards unravelling the threads of its making, in the process confronting the codes which constantly construct and reconstruct the subjectivity of the reader. The reader is being placed in history by the textual operations which take place in the film. This involves work on the readers' part, and texts such as *Kanchenjunga* and *Viridiana* (1961), nearly contemporaneous with *Psycho*, demonstrate the uses and the pleasures of such work. This view is different from the theoretical work we have been considering.

I saw *Kanchenjunga* a few days after its first release, in a cinema in south Kolkata which was one of half a dozen straddling a busy road. All of them used to show Bangla films. The interior of the house was spacious, though a little dingy, and the

electric fans interfered with the dialogue. But the middle-class Bengali crowd was happy at the prospect of another Satyajit Ray. One felt entirely at home, which was only natural. There was relief that one did not have to sit through another sentimental melodrama from the local studios, and pride because our very own Satyajit Ray had given us another masterpiece. One was sure this was going to be a masterpiece, and that was very much a part of the experience of viewing. The double distancing of the experience of *Psycho* — geographical and textual — seemed a remote interlude contingent on the surfacing of immanent power relationships. *Kanchenjunga*, on the other hand, had a congenial surrounding and an accessible text, though the text demanded a great deal of work from the viewer. And one aspect of this work was to deconstruct the postcolonial condition. The text made available to you some of the conditions for the production of postcolonial gestures to the metropolitan west. This is constantly foregrounded and made part of the patriarchal subjugation of women and appropriation of the landscape. One had a feeling that the foregrounding of the violence in *Psycho* was hiding an infinitely greater violence — murdering, pillaging, raping, evicting, usurping — on which American civilization is founded and which forms the bedrock of morality which propels such societies. *Kanchenjunga* is interested in laying bare the power structure which legitimizes and obscures the long history of violence and oppression under colonial / semi-feudal / patriarchal rule. If theory favours the pleasure to be got from the popular western text, it may be complicit with some of the violence these texts seek to naturalize. This sounds moralistic, but then tolerance is largely a matter of morality.

### *The Utopian Move*

The narrative desire in *Psycho* makes an elegant curve into a grisly murder. But then the murder itself is elegantly organized. The three brief shots of the murderer shows an ungainly erect figure in a dowdy woman's dress and an ill-fitting wig, wielding the long knife in abrupt stiff-armed jabs which would hardly dispatch a healthy young female of the hardy Anglo-Saxon stock. This ugly stiffness of the murderer is strictly in line with the suggested figure of the hitherto invisible mother oedipally guarding her son from younger rivals. For purposes of internal and external verisimilitude, a male impersonator

is bound to be clumsy. And then come the carefully crafted images of a young female body seen only in bits and pieces — the wholeness of a person is reduced to the purely corporeal and then this corporeality is further foregrounded into mere traces and fragments: a torso, a leg, an arm a splay of fingers, a face, an eye, a flow of blood. The heavy-lidded dead eye is matched by the rounded shower-head and the drain-hole; the blood transiently reddens the flow of water and gradually becomes a mere trace in the mind's eye. The metaphoric displacement of bodily parts by inert materials objects is more than a fetishistic transformation; it also indicates a motivization of familiar appurtenances of a dull, commonplace frequently used interior. The victim is hardly ever in a private space of her own; she is being continuously moved from one public haunt to another: hotel room, office, street, car on motorway, toilet in petrol pump, motel office, standard bedroom, usual bathroom. Hitchcock's famous personalization of the murderer's house, of ascribing to it a cameratic point of view follows from this commonplace desire for defamiliarizing the diurnal. Cheap thrillers and horror-flicks are full of it till this day. *Psycho* takes you to the limits of what Barthes' *proairetic* code demands: one slice of action after another which would fall under the reassuring mantle of the familiar, set in locations which evoke the thickness of ubiquitous, replicated institutions of American urban life. Hitchcock is a master of the visual cliché precisely because he needs this slice-of-life reassurance for his viewer before he brings in the explosive oxymorons of extreme violence. This is a trick which Hollywood had perfected in the course of its pursuit of the lowest common denominator in narrative values. A standardized representation of the made-to-order material texture of existence, formulaic montage capturing clichés of action and speech, generic marking of shots often reversing or exceeding the order of the expected (like the verification of the ordinary in thrillers or the female protagonist in road movies) — Hollywood narratives deploy a plenitude of the mundane and the quotidian as recurrent preludes to the spectacular and the violent.

There is a utopian move in the arc of desire along which the narrative moves from the mundane to the violent, the familiar to the shocking. A peaceful bar scene, reassuringly banal, suddenly erupts into a spectacle of gory gunfight; a woman driving on the motorway is chased and crashed into by gun-toting hoodlums; a man leisurely

finishes dinner, gets up and shoots his companion to death; a man waiting for a bus on a lonely road is attacked by a crop-spraying plane; a girl quietly having a shower is repeatedly stabbed to death. Hollywood is forever obsessed with dullness of the daily grind; it must, therefore, construct a utopia where things liven up by means of murder or rape or earthquake or fire or war. No wonder America is ill at ease with quietness. If domestic murders get routinized, invade a country or two at regular intervals. The firebombs hurled at Baghdad make a pretty picture on television.

### *History and Theory*

Why does Hollywood hide from history, or hide its own history from the viewer? Among other things, its modes of representation make history thin and boring and it has to convert historical narratives into spectacular personalized accounts like *Ben Hur* or *Lawrence of Arabia*. But there is at the same time an ethical perspective which is at work behind the move on the elimination of history. You follow the pleasure principle in eliminating what is painful to your psyche or damaging to your self-esteem. Genocide is ugly not because you have any compunction in killing for gain, but because a consensus has been slowly built up which disapproves of its worst excesses. And it is not very easy all the time to devise newer ranges of rhetoric in tune with the demands of this emerging morality. The spin doctors cannot always cope. This is where Hollywood and TV and pop music can step in; entertainment offers pleasure and is therefore exempt from the tug of judgement. All pleasure is always in the present, encapsulated into a space which recognizes no movement in time. Utopias do not age. If there are any signatures of contemporaneity or pastness in the text these can be incorporated into the overall schema of timeless loops of pure *fabula*. The principle is the same as in comics. You have to assume that Dennis the Menace remains the same age in hundreds of adventures. This is where the other kind of text offers alternatives. *Viridiana* would be very difficult to read if you do not follow the historical signals embedded in the text. *Kanchenjunga* demands your attention to the postcolonial refraction of patriarchy in which a young girl is fighting a battle on two fronts: the father's imperatives and the suitor's invasive attentions. Film theory itself would be impoverished if it shies away from such texts.