USES OF FILM THEORY

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It has been some time since turning one's back on Theory became fashionable, which should prompt us to consider if one has acknowledged the debt at all before starting the mourning.

David Bordwell and his colleagues have produced a prominent collection of statements against Theory. In a book titled *Post-Theory*, they have put in the dock the whole legacy of what is known as '*Screen theory'* after the British journal [1]. It is a challenge to the 'constructivism' of that theory, to its ideological commitment to totalities and large schemes; but more than that, to its psychoanalytical moorings. On the last count hardly any critical negation is proposed, what is offered instead is a denial from the grounds of cognitivism. Cognitivism has come back, in social theory and in cultural criticism. But as Slavoj Zizek has reminded us in several recent essays, the cognitivist denial of the unconscious is simply that, a denial, which itself should be put to analysis. The other target of attack in *Post-Theory* is Cultural Studies, which, since we are quarrelling, let me admit I find more pertinent. Cultural Studies has worked towards a diffusion of the theoretical knowledge in question, but it has also helped de-link that knowledge from its initial constellation, from what David N. Rodowick has called its 'political modernism'. At least one powerful branch of Cultural Studies has contributed towards the imagination of an all-encompassing cultural space whose only radical promise lies in its heterogeneity, where evaluation is given up in favour of alterity and difference. It is largely this inspiration that has produced another branch of research on cinema that distances itself from questions of production and ideology — the study of audiences and consumption.

In the nineties, in the pages of *Screen* itself one noticed a drift away from the convictions and systems of the Theory era, sometimes a disavowal of its legacy. This is the 'Third Age' of film studies in Dudley Andrew's survey of the field in *PMLA*[2]. A positive development in this phase has been the renewed interest in historical research on film and television. The problem, however, appears where the underpinning project is not

development of a theory of practice, but a practice of criticism free of theoretical constraints. Thus Christopher Williams, who once edited a BFI reader on *Realism in Cinema*, seeks to disown Colin MacCabe's characterization of the 'classic realist text', an essay he included in that Reader [3]. The argument is symptomatic: the classic realist text is to be found nowhere in cinema, therefore it must be wrong to posit it; one has no reason to make the mistake of formulating such a text now that the ideological imperative does not exist, now that Marxism is dead, etc. What does his empirical survey prove? That realism is to be found everywhere. This is not the historical corrective that Raymond *Williams* offered to the anti-realist stance of the *Screen* in 1977 [4], or the cautions sounded by the editors of the journal themselves from time to time against the crystallizing orthodoxies [5]; it is expiation. The preliminary objection to this should be that without positing a paradigmatic form of the realist text one could not begin to theorize the realisms that Christopher Williams locates in world cinema. The problem of the paradigm itself is not a problem of theory *per se*.

Behind much of the disaffection with Theory is also a sense of technological overtaking of the pace of reflection. Does not the digital era render obsolete the very material in which Theory sprang its roots? To take a random example, a recent essay in Screen argues how the opposition between narrative and spectacle loses relevance as we confront the digitalized space, or what the author calls the 'timespace' of current cinema. Once the shot itself is altered in the computer, the spatial relations of film undergo radical mutation; narrative can now be embedded within the spectacle [6]. Such arguments, rather than superseding the opposition in question, actually present its re-configuration. The paradigm shift of digital technology is still the critic's projection; new technique is not immediately echoed by new form. Instead of the anxiety to change oneself remembering what might happen tomorrow the more useful thing to do will be what Laura Mulvey has proposed: to see how the intimations of a digital transformation of cinema give us a vantage point to reflect on the forms of that cinema - forms that supposed to have become old[7].

There is still another group of writers for whom the inheritance of seventies theory is crucial; not because they would like to cling on to its shibboleths, but because they find it essential to work through the major concepts produced in that ferment, to extend them to new use and to their own critical limits, rather than staging a theoretical abdication. For them it is also a question of not forgetting the break with the pre-Theory past that has come to us as an inheritance.

In the rest of this presentation, I would like to do a brief exercise in historical reading of film that uses a central conceptual model developed in the seventies, while trying to reconsider the suspicion of representation that underpinned much of the seventies theory. I would like to start from the spectacle-narrative divide mentioned above. Laura Mulvey's widely read essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), was a *locus classicus* for the argument, where she showed how the compulsion to look at the female body implants a disjunction at the heart of narrative film. The exhibitionism tends to arrest the flow of narration; the screen tends to turn at the spectator breaking the rules of illusion. This formulation has possibly been more productive in subsequent work than the classification of looks that the essay proposed. Mulvey herself has developed it into an investigation of fetishism (*Fetishism and Curiosity*, 1996) and spectatorship [8]. In the eighties and nineties, probably the most exciting new work in film studies was done in the investigation of Early Cinema. In the rich body of work on Early Cinema in various national contexts, the spectacle-narrative dialectic has proved to be a crucial theoretical key. These studies have shown how Early Cinema worked with modern tools and materials to produce an address that does not fall within the modern paradigms of form and address. The pervasive frontality of Early Cinema can be best grasped as an exhibitionist impulse — retaining the old civic function of theatre — that creates an outward contact with the audience. This jettisons the classic narrative impulse of modernity — which addresses the individualized spectator, inscribes the look in the text, thereby creating a voyeuristic condition. Using the same theoretical key, the historian can unpack other aspects of the primitive mode — the externality of the narrator, the heteronomy of the film text, etc., and relate them to the entertainment forms in which Early Cinema was physically embedded. The question of form could also be

extended to a network of social relations in this way. The description of the early film paradigm helps one reflect on the narrative model that emerged with cinema's formal inscription in modern institutions. And it also helps us locate the continuing dialectic of frontal address and linear unfolding, of the community-based address and contractual social address in the later development of cinema. More often than not this dialectic has overlapped with that between spectacle and narrative.

In an important essay on Dadasaheb Phalke, written in 1987, Ashish Rajadhyaksha developed a similar approach independently[9.] He sought to explain the cultural process that rendered the frame borrowed from late nineteenth-century popular painting, photography and stage mobile. He did this by an implicit reference to a tension between the two drives of iconic frontality and elaboration in secular time. Since then other critics have worked on Indian cinema following such intuition. To call the tension in question dialectical has the advantage of pointing to the fact that a transition from early, artisanal mode of cinema to the industrial narrative mode should not be seen in a 'stages theory' of development but as a struggle that has more than one moment to inhabit. The 'transition' returns to several phases of Indian cinema, sometimes allegorically within a single film, sometimes traversing a cluster of films. It is against the measure of the abstracted, reformulated 'spectacle' that narrativization has to be understood from time to time. It would be worthwhile to look at this recurrent 'transition as event', the dialectical distribution of the trope — spectacle versus narrative — in a way that, now unlike the seventies theory, would not push representational content outside the margins.

I would like to think here of the example of a critical period of transition in Indian cinema, the early 1950s. As we follow the dynamics of the *Social* film through the forties into the following decade, we come to a point in the early fifties when a negotiation of certain modes of filmmaking — modes that we recognize as typically belonging to modern formations across the media — becomes clearly visible. The culmination of this process came with a new popular fashioned around 1953/ 54, a new melodrama that established close affinities with global modes of the bourgeois melodrama. This cinema

showed marked differences with the Studio-*Social* of the two previous decades — in thematic structures, in codes of cinematography, performance, speech and mise-en-scene, and in narrative style.

One way of looking at the transformation in question is to look at the new representational content of the city. The story of the citizen's career, the new theme and rhetoric of love — are now embedded in an urban adventure. The anonymity, the crowd, the loosening of community roots the city offered is explored with newly mobilized energy. There is of course also a plot of compromise that sometimes catches up with the adventure, there is a desperate seeking of shelter in the old family, in the village, but the mode of presentation could exceed the plot even in such cases. The urban journey functions as the primary seduction, as a zone of vividness and intensity that cannot be neutralized by the attending moral anxiety. Country-city dualism becomes non-central to these films. The central character is often one whose figurative location is on the way to the city, not on the poles of that dualism. Dev Anand, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor and, in a more consistent way, Uttam Kumar in Bengal came to present a protagonist who is literally without parents, at least without a father, adrift in the city, but also at home there. He navigates the city precisely to make sense of a new belonging.

As cinema produces this representational content, this new referential horizon, narrativity is inflected in a certain direction. The spectacle-narrative dialectic is distributed over this process; it seems to appear at various levels. Assimilation of Hollywood conventions reached an enthusiastic pace in the early fifties. After 1952, the first International Film Festival in India, the neo-realist repertoire of codes became visible across practices in the industry. One attempting a study of the new articulation of space into narrative in this cinema has to move through intersecting planes of thematic constellations, genre, stardom, performance and music; mise-en-scene and editing cannot be the sole consideration. Let us think of a few films made between 1951 and 1954 here:

Nimai Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (1951) tells the story of a group of peasants crossing over from East Pakistan to Calcutta in the wake of the partition of India. The film is divided into two halves; a split organized in fundamental ways around the distinction between the two locations, the village and the city. From Naldanga, an unspecified rural location, the peasants come to the city that embodies the historical 'now', the 'city as present'. The journey by train takes place through   burning landscape, through murder and mayhem. It is sign-posted midway by the name of a real location, the 'Darshana' railway station. Then, as the images of Sealdah Station appear in the dawn, this introduction of the real becomes dreamlike because of a radical shift in style that it precipitates. A definite location and a definite time appear through which the city has to be perceived. From the autonomy of the 'scene', found consistently in the first half of the film, from its allegorical and didactic contact with the viewer we come into this new contact with space. Now the narrative will literally get scattered, loosened from its mooring in a drama that was focused on a peasant couple. What now appears is a 'dispersed' mode in more than one sense of the term. As the group tries to find a foothold in the sea of humanity caught up in the process of finding new locations and names, the story of the central couple introduced in the first half almost loses its hold on the action. The intrusion of the real in the form of a city captured even as it lives through the very moment of filmmaking can be recognized as material invading the frame from outside the narrative, in relative terms that is. This came almost as a shock to Indian   cinema because of the stylistic split within the body of the film, as if the partition of the land has produced a dislocation from a past mode of picturing experience. This split produces a choice in favour of the city style, misrecognized by most contemporary critics as a documentary style (I am thinking of the contemporary reviews in the Bengali magazine *Chitrabani* and in the English magazine *Filmfare*).

A lot has been written on the image of the city What Kevin Lynch called the 'imageability' of the city, its legibility in terms of enumeration, plan and grid[10] — a theme developed later by critics working on urban geography and related fields — inspires us to think in terms of a cinema-city overlap which is not purely an object and image relationship. In an earlier phase of film criticism, it was reflection on photography

and film that brought the deep connection between cinema and the city into focus. Benjamin and Kracauer pointed out the affinity between the photograph and city streets and crowds, between the cinematic eye and the gaze of the urban man in his walk. What we call here the 'city as present' accumulates a semiotic content that is imprinted in curious ways on the body of the film. In *Chhinnamul*, this semiotic density of reality is recognized by the political gaze of the filmmakers. It was a production undertaken by activists of a left-wing cultural movement launched in the early years of the forties.

In Agradoot's *Babla* (1951) or Zia Sarhady's *Footpath* (1953), this spatial consciousness of the city remains elusive. In *Footpath* for example, a poignant and politically self-conscious exploration of urban slum-life, the grime, darkness and solitude perceived against a densely delineated backdrop, the tragic degeneracy of the new citizen — all this is locked into a 'denominational' use of space, bringing depth of description into conflict with allegorical schematism. Space is still conceived as relatively autonomous scenes mobilized for the purpose of staging a moral or social conflict, for performing a content, so to speak. This conflict of advanced social realist content and the insistence of a style derived from the Studio-*Socials* could produce interesting results, but betrayed a compromise in form in this specific context. *Footpath, Pathik* (Debaki Bose, 1953), *Bootpolish* (Prakash Arora, 1954), *Garam Coat* (Amar Kumar, 1955) — to name some prominent social realist works from the period — all show this tendency, but I am thinking here of the illuminating case of Ritwik Ghatak's debut film *Nagarik* (1953). The film begins with an invocation strongly suggesting an encounter with the city, it addresses the city itself as a protagonist ("I know him, I have seen him ... standing out there, the metropolis..."). 'Him' of course refers also to the hero, the 'citizen' of the title), but then resorts to the Studio Style, which appears as a retreat in more than one sense. The restrictive board and cloth settings produce enumerable locations, and hence there is no impression of the interconnecting space, the figure of 'travel', the map of the city that should have been imprinted even on the localized fragments of action and exchange. The latter's logic should have worked as an absent grid behind even the indoor and the private scenes. This map could have set in motion narrativization itself in a fundamental way. *Nagarik* largely shirks from the task of processing a representational content that it has

set itself. The four interludes of city streets, shot on location, come into straightforward conflict with the rest of the visualization.

We are calling the 'frontalized' space the space of denomination, where the signified precedes the text. The social realist intent, at this moment appearing as a response to national modernization in the mainstream cinema, and appearing across genres, was one important motivation for dissolution of denominational space (which is always incomplete as a process), but the important thing to remember is it did not produce only social realist films. Let us think of one generic tendency that, significantly, became very popular in the period and later actually disappeared. It presented a resolution that would lay the basis of the new melodrama. A comic appropriation of the crime drama produced some of the most sophisticated examples of narrative elaboration in the *Social* [11]. The potential inherent in crime and comedy to subvert social self-evaluations and moral discourses is mobilized in these films to celebrate the new dynamism of the city — the variety and complexity of modes of living, the drama of contrasts between the social classes, the visibility of change, the anonymity of appearances, the routes of personal adventure. Guru Dutt would prove the master of the genre, his *Aar Paar* and his associate Chetan Anand's *Taxi Driver* appeared 1954. Both films show the inclination to work through denominational spaces — spaces that become stages for action by contributing extra-textual significance to the latter. Typically, the café with its seductress dancer is the main example of this kind of space in these films. But they signal what I would call the new popular form through a clear revaluation of such space-content. The latter appear here within designated blocks in a narrative progression. Both *Aar Paar* and *Taxi Driver* have cab drivers as protagonists who get involved in some criminal plot. Subaltern neighbourhoods are studied in their behavioural patterns; character types and the culture of humour, public spaces and street-life of Bombay are captured through extensive use of outdoors that lend a vibrancy and fluidity to the very texture of the image. The plot is distributed over the map of the city, its trajectories overlap with the urban grid — a spatial articulation of the narrative unfolding is achieved through the contact with the everyday dynamics of a location. The intermediary spaces, elided between denominations in the earlier group of films, are now integrated into the diegetic

continuity. The difference with the visual and sequencing style of the realist *Social* (from say, *Kismet* (Gyan Mukherjee, 1943) or *Udayer Pathe* (Bimal Roy, 1944) to *Pathik, Footpath* or *Naukri* (Bimal Roy, 1954) is marked. One should mention here that this principle of shooting is followed in *Aar Paar* even in the song and dance scenes, neutralizing their 'spectacle' positioning.

A comparison with the immensely popular use of Hollywood horror/ suspense conventions in *Mahal* (Kamal Amrohi, 1949) also reveals the major transformation that image and narrative have undergone in films like *Aar Paar*. Without the generic motivation of horror (or even suspense) Guru Dutt develops an aesthetics of high contrasts in the frame, and also brings into effect a tonal range that comes very close to the cinematography developed by Subrata Mitra and others for the new realist cinema from 1955. Vision is not only redirected through a play of light and darkness, it is consistently blocked and fragmented — car windows, railings, pillars, scaffolds impose frames within frames, oblique vision becomes necessary, and lateral depth is enhanced through the same dynamics. Location shooting in the city is extended into a textural principle of the image and a sequencing principle between images. The principle of fragmentation and continuity, breaking away emphatically from the Studio-Style, comes to a head in the scene of the bank heist in *Aar Paar*. The use of point-of-view shots, the parallelism established between brisk pieces of action and the build-up of suspense show that the *Social* has already negotiated a certain global principle of realist narrativity.

The realist break of *Pather Panchali* (1955) was also an assimilation, assimilation of a specific configuration of the tussle between spectacle and narrative in Indian cinema.

References:

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3. 'After the Classic, the Classical and Ideology: The Differences of Realism', *Screen* 53:3, 1994.

4. 'A Lecture on Realism', *Screen* 18:1, 1977.

5. See for example the Editorial of *Screen* 18:1, 1977.

6. Aylish Wood, 'Timespaces in Spectacular Cinema: Crossing the Great Divide of Spectacle versus Narrative', *Screen* 43:4, Winter, 2002.

7. Mulvey, 'The "Pensive Spectator" Revisited: Time and Its Passing in the Still Image', unpublished paper presented in Calcutta, 2004.

8. See Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, London: BFI Publishing, 1996.

9. 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas* No. 14—15, 1987.

10. *The Image of the City*, Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1960.

11. We should remember here the problem of the thriller in Indian cinema, the problem that the popular film form has faced in elaborating the logic of detection, causality and reasoning. In the following period the failure to develop the thriller became common and symptomatic.