



Alternative Cinema : Response of Indian Film Studies

Alternative cinema

As an adjective ‘alternative’ means a counter-thesis the dominant or conventional. The simply discernible notion of alternative cinema denotes a cinema that breaks or at least deviates from economic, cultural and political conventions in its mode of productions and representational style. In other words ‘alternative cinema’ is expected to invent an alternative system of production-distribution-exhibition, or to subvert the norms of the culture industry. But there are questions which might complicate the simple definition of ‘alternative cinema’. Consider a film which is produced and circulated following conventions of industry and market but subverts the dominant representational norms – does the film fall under the category of ‘alternative cinema’? For example, in the present scenario it is not easy to identify alternative cinema with textual characteristics since some of the major characteristics are often observed in the bodies of mainstream cinema and television. Or can national cinemas, which stand as opposed to the dominant Hollywood cinema, claim the status of alternative cinema in the larger scenario of World Cinema?

This article shall not aspire to find satisfactory answers to these questions,

but these problems are important in relation to the disciplinary approach in reading alternative cinema in the non-West vis-à-vis the categories of national cinema and textual systems. Which approach is appropriate from the point of view of film studies: To consider alternative cinema as a part of national cinema or to consider it as a lineage of global critical response to the classic realist film? Since both approaches are relevant which would be the dominant paradigm of understanding? As far as methods are concerned, reading alternative cinema from the perspective of national cinema mainly involves historical and cultural specificities, while reading alternative cinema from global perspective involves a structuralist method of locating a text in a template of 'similarity' and 'difference' in relation to the classic realist structure. The classic realist structure is assumed in the later method as the convention of narrativization and spatial articulation in cinematic practices.

Alternative cinema Alternative paradigm

Let's start the discussion with reference to Stephen Teo. Assuming Hollywood cinema as the dominant paradigm, he investigates the possibility of delineating Asian cinematic practice as an alternative paradigm. Asian cinema is not our present concern, but the discussion on alternative paradigm in relation to Hollywood cinema in one hand and national cinemas in the other might help us. Here Teo places an interesting argument with reference to Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto's and Paul Willemen's positions in the discussion of alternative paradigm.¹

Yoshimoto has argued that reading Asian cinema [or any cinema outside Hollywood] on the basis of cultural specificity, and therefore assigning it the tag of alternative may lead to 'reverse ethnocentrism' of the West. His contention is that the obsessive search for 'local culture' in explaining alternative cinema from a non-western country may become fraught with essentialism. Yoshimoto actually refers to some critics who try to champion 'nativism' or ethno-specificity in order to explain alternative cultural practices. Local/ ethnic cultural specificity surely informs the reading of an alternative text but in some critics' writings local cultural specificity overrules all other theoretical paradigms and historical facts. To them 'local' is *essentially* alternative. Yoshimoto raises strong objection against that kind of view.²

Paul Willemen, on the other hand, is very apprehensive to accept Hollywood as the global cinematic form. He explains that Hollywood cinema controls cinema of a maximum of ten countries all over the globe. He considers 'national cinema' as an all-encompassing category in his frame-work of reading cinema.

To him, the encounter between local cultures and economies and universal capitalism and imported modernity gives rise to modern cultural forms, which finally take the shape of national literature and national cinema in history. Willemen argues that there may arise a central discourse and several fringe discourses as a result of those historical encounters. He infers that the central discourse consolidates as 'national popular' cinematic form and fringe discourses inspire 'alternative' cinema. That is, an alternative cinema, though it exists at the margin, belongs to the national cinema paradigm.³ Therefore, following Willemen's line of argument, a disciplinary method which is able to read national cinema may be extended in understanding alternative cinemas too. 'Alternative' as derived from Willemen's articulation is a 'fringe' of the national.

Stephen Teo differs with both Yoshimoto and Willemen. He argues that 'local content' cannot be always negatively equated with 'cultural nationalism'. Teo elucidates that in Australia, for example, the connotations of 'local content' are considered as 'positive' whereas the phrase yields negative and doubtful sagacity in Asian contexts [or also may be in African or South American context]. The relationship between 'local content' and 'cultural nationalism' should be judged from historical experiences. Teo raises another important issue related to the context of the reception of alternative cinema. He explains, with reference to sociologist Brayan S. Turner's concept of 'axial space', that an auteurist or art-house film celebrated from the point of view of global audience as 'alternative' may be criticized in domestic circuit as conventional effort of showcasing nativism or exoticism for the consumption of 'western' audiences. Art cinema, from Asia, Africa and South America, a major constituency of alternative cinema, often experiences this kind of two-fold reception. Alternative cinema may sometimes appear as a paradoxical term particularly when it is considered as a constituency of local / ethno-specific cultural articulation.⁴

Though Teo partially agrees that national cinema is an important paradigm, which is to be taken into account in the discussion of alternative cinema, he disagrees with Willemen that the national cinema paradigm is sufficient in dealing with alternative cinemas in the non-West. He explains his position that alternative [cinema] is different from mainstream and is relatively unique, yet it forms a part of the heterogeneous and hybrid system of cinematic practices in the world. Teo means alternative cinema is evidently different in function and operation of economic power in its place in the culture industry in relation to studio system, star system and generic system, but above all he finds the

uniqueness of alternative cinema in radicalized textual systems. He wishes to focus on the direction and stylization of spaces in order to locate alternative cinema in the constellation of global avant-garde as well as in local specificities.⁵

Alternative cinema in India – an instance

The New Cinema Movement (NCM) in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the most important collective effort that helped consolidating the idea of searching for an alternative in Indian cinema. Before the NCM, alternative in Indian cinema was identified with auteur cinema made by Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, and with the so-called socially committed cinema of the 1940s and 1950s made by a disparate group of filmmakers who once belonged to the radical cultural movement of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). The NCM is the first conscious, comprehensive and collective effort in Indian cinema which proclaimed in explicit terms its line of action towards an alternative.

The manifesto of the New Cinema Movement published in 1968 emphasizes several factors which inspired them to launch a new film movement. The NCM is proclaimed to be a conscious reaction to “[t]he Indian cinema, especially the [contemporary] Hindi cinema.”⁶ Art cinema usually ignores popular cinema and maintains an elitist distance from the so-called industrial cinema. But the NCM declares that its effort primarily is a critical response to industrial cinema in India and it is an attempt to revolutionize Indian cinema with an alternative endurance. The manifesto mentions, “[A]n incredible dearth of ideas and imagination in creative matters [...] has reduced Indian film industry to a sorry mess.”⁷ The NCM, therefore aspired to bring ‘fresh air’ in Indian cinema in terms of ‘new ideas’, ‘new forms’ and ‘new audiences’.

Let's summarize some salient points of the NCM proclamations⁸ which aim to alter the ‘sorry state’ of Indian cinema:

- i. The French New Wave inspired filmmakers of the new cinema. The manifesto of the NCM echoes the French New Wave filmmakers' stand, “New Cinema stands for film ‘with a signature’.”
- ii. The American Underground cinema and ‘other yet unlabelled currents in world cinema’ helped them to conceptualize and to enthuse them towards launching a similar film movement in India. They believed, “[T]he climate needed to nourish it obtains today.”
- iii. The New Cinema would engage itself in a ‘ruthless’ search for ‘truth’ as an individual artist sees it. They proclaimed their task as: “looking afresh at everything including old values and in probing

deeper everything, including the mind and condition of man.”

iv. The NCM planned an alternative system of production, distribution and exhibition. It was to be ensured that New Cinema would be seen by the people. They said, “New cinema expects of its audience the kind of participation and involvement which modern art demands.”

(a) Small budget films were planned to be produced under NCM’s banner. The NCM announced that apart from 35mm and 16mm feature length fictions, short films of 10-20 minutes duration, documentaries and avant-garde/ experimental efforts of a new kind would be encouraged.

(b) They will make and distribute their own films and acquire, hire or purchase ‘foreign films of merit’. The NCM planned three layers of distribution and exhibition of films.

Distribution through Academy Cinema chain, and exhibition in art theatres on Sunday morning, and exhibitions in assembly halls of schools, colleges, charitable cultural and social organizations.

Exhibition of films in film shows organized by film societies, film clubs of colleges and universities all over the country.

Independent filmmakers and foreign filmmakers of merit would be offered to release their films in regular commercial circuits through the NCM.

Despite the fact that the NCM engaged itself in a serious negotiation with the conventional Indian cinema, it is clear that their agenda should be read in relation to other contemporary movements of world cinema of the 1960s and ’70s. They redefined domestic film market and domestic audience, yet they aligned themselves with similar efforts and initiatives taken by collectives of filmmakers in other countries. Actually their intense engagement with cultural, aesthetic and political realities of the ‘local’ was conceptualized in relation to different film movements and initiatives of contemporary world cinema. The influence of the French New Wave and American avant-garde was clearly evident in their manifesto as well as in their film language. But their inclination towards making socially committed cinema, and their attempt to find audience for the New Cinema and foreign films of similar kind by launching an alternative system of distribution and exhibition articulated a specific response to the international cinema that emerged in South America, East Europe, post-colonial Africa and Asian regions since the 1960s.

It is true that NCM’s effort cannot be easily categorized as ‘third cinema’ as it often distanced itself in practice from ‘cinema of liberation/

decolonization'. But it was pioneered by filmmakers like Mrinal Sen and Mani Kaul, and later by Gautam Ghose and Shyam Benegal, and it has inspired filmmakers like John Abraham who significantly contributed to political cinema. It is a fact that at least a major part of New Cinema must be aligned with 'third cinema'. Above all, the filmmakers of the NCM addressed local landscapes, local narratives of struggle and local history which was hidden beneath so-called national culture and hegemonic versions of national history. But this trend was not a specific trend of the New Cinema in India. Similar trends were observed in contemporary cinemas of the non-West - in the films of Fernando Birri of Argentina, Glauber Rocha and Nelson Pereira of Brazil, Raul Ruiz and Miguel Littin of Chile, Jorge Sanjines of Bolivia, Ousmane Sembene of Senegal, Souleymane Cisse of Mali, and in the films of many other experimental and documentary filmmakers. These filmmakers made films on local cultures, geography and demography and politicized the representation of the 'local' with the help of their radical approaches. It is important to investigate the conditions of possibility of these world-wide common trends in the alternative cinemas of 1960s and 1970s.

The spatial articulation and representation of tropical landscapes in the films of the NCM in India, Cinema Novo of Brazil, Cinema of liberation of Argentina, or cinema of decolonization of Senegal are worth comparison. The NCM filmmakers made number of films on Telengana. Similarly, Cinema Novo produced films on *sertao* – the arid backland of north-eastern Brazil, and Argentine filmmakers made films on *sur* – the southern pampas of the country.⁹ Though one should not mechanically try to find semblance in these filmmakers' works, I would like to prefer the term 'equivalence' which one may try to find in their spatial articulations. The tropical plant life, scorching light, barrenness of land and silence of the lonely fields appear in these films which are accompanied by local narratives of struggle, folklores and peasant lives. It is not acceptable that there exists an essence of the third world culture and geography, or that this commonness of trends is merely a co-incidence. Rather, it can be understood as a moment of historical confluence when the representation of some particular kind of tropical landscapes inhabited by the peasantry helps filmmakers to articulate counter-theses to cultural nationalism as well as to the global culture industry.

The metonymic, indexical and allegorical implications of barren tropical landscapes are used by filmmakers of different nations at a particular juncture of history in order to produce alternatives of the so-called national cinema as well as of Hollywood. One should not ignore this phenomenon since historically

and politically the conditions of its possibility became viable in these places.

Alternative cinema in India & Indian Film Studies

Ashish Rajadhyaksha's recent book *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid* contains two chapters on Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* (1969) and Gautam Ghose's *Maabhoomi* (1979).¹⁰ In these chapters, the author deals with two masterpieces of the NCM in India which are considered as two prime film-texts of alternative cinematic practice. His close reading of these two films is sincere and scholarly. No scholar of Indian film studies before addressed the issue of alternative films in India so extensively and diligently. I would like to take these two chapters of Rajadhyaksha's work for symptomatic reading. There is no claim that Rajadhyaksha's position provides the only and full-proof theoretical framework in Indian film studies. But his articulation has certain elements which foreground the basic conceptual assumptions of Indian film studies. To cite Subhajit Chatterjee, "[The book] is able to provide narrative account not merely of cinema, but also of 'Indian film theory'."¹¹

In the chapter 'Mani Kaul and the Cinematic Object: *Uski Roti* and the Rulebook of Cinema' Rajadhyaksha discusses the territorial / local realism (related to the divided Punjab in post-independence India where the narrative is set), and the creative means with which the territorial realism is represented in Mani Kaul's film. He analyzes how cinematic apparatus encounters the local space and character. He shows how the film manifests the '*ideas* of a specific society into *spatial/ temporal object*'.¹² (emphasis mine). Technically speaking, he masterfully analyzes how Mani Kaul deploys the unique style of spatial articulation in order to produce a 'territorial realism', and how this critical style of articulation disrupts the logic of the classic realist structure in relation to representation and the spectatorial position. Theoretically speaking, he tries to place the alternative mode of address of Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* as a representative of 'fringe' discourses inside Indian national cinema.

Guided by Willemen's model, Rajadhyaksha infers that cinema, basically a realist medium (and a foreign form), has encountered in history the local (Indian) content, which yields the melodramatic mode as a central discourse and local versions of realism as fringe discourses. Following Willemen, he approaches alternative cinematic forms as forming a 'fringe' to national cinema in India.

In the chapter on 'The Detour of the Nation: Realist Complicacies, Nationalist Excesses'¹³, he discusses third cinema and other film movements of similar kind. He argues that third cinema (that includes Cinema Novo and

Imperfect Cinema), which emerged and developed in the 1960s and '70s in Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Chile, Bolivia, Kenya, Ghana and other parts of the non-West, are national cinemas. Despite their similarities in style and ideological commonness, they are basically and finally national cinemas because they depend to a large extent on state funding and were conditioned by censorship. The author makes rather desperate attempts to fit third cinemas into the national cinema paradigm before he enters the discussion of *Uski Roti* and *Maabhoomi*. He works hard to prove his point, but his explication never addresses how and why the commonness of style, spatial and temporal articulation, and ideology among third cinema films historically came into being in order to consciously produce counter-theses to the 'first' and 'second' cinemas. No trans-border or trans-cultural influence/ interface is recognized by the author. The major problem in this approach is that the author is reluctant to acknowledge any 'agency' beyond Capitalism as a universal force and State as a national force. In his theorization, possibilities of any global or trans-border negotiation outside the realm of capitalism and state are foreclosed; and when it comes, it comes as mere instrumentality. My contentions can be summed up in the following way:

- a) There is a tendency in Indian Film Studies that everything should be resolved within the national cinema paradigm. But the problem of the attempt to fit alternative cinema into the national cinema paradigm is that alternative cinema, in most of the cases, aspires to become a part of the world-wide response to universal capitalism.
- b) An assumption that every kind of realism has kinship with the classic realist structure often (mis)guides Indian film studies. How the classic realist structure and other realist forms have come into the field of cultural experience must be examined historically. The experience varies from nation to nation, culture to culture. In India, for example, the realist forms of Gorky and Zola became more familiar than Dickens and Hardy. Hollywood cinema has been culturally less familiar than the so-called world cinema for different historical reasons. By contrast, in Latin American countries in the 1940s and 50s, Hollywood cinema's classic realist structure was experienced as the dominant cinematic form. In order to talk about alternative cinema, ample historical research is required on the issue of the emergence of modernism in local and national level. If this task is evaded, as it has happened in Rajadhyaksha's arguments on *Uski Roti* and *Maabhoomi*, the term 'territorial [or local] realism' becomes a-historical and given.

c) The modular concept that realism is the national-*statist* form and melodrama is the national-*popular* form leads to a trap in which Rajadhyaksha's argument falls when he finds equivalence between 'realist complicities' and 'nationalist excesses'. Coupling Realism-State and Melodrama-Nation doesn't help us in reading alternative cinema. Since alternative cinema strives to achieve 'uniqueness' in production and in textual system, it constantly borrows avant-garde and modernist elements from world cinema. It is not useful to limit the reading of alternative cinema within the national cinema paradigm. Both local cultures (as challenge to the 'national culture'), and avant-garde or modernism at the international level (as challenge to the 'global dominant culture') inspire alternative cinema.

Postscript

Let's return to Stephen Teo's argument mentioned earlier in this article.¹⁴ Using Teo's insight we can conclude that an alternative paradigm is to be invoked in order to read and explain alternative cinema – a new paradigm that surpasses the 'national cinema paradigm'. The new paradigm, while addressing alternative film, should take into account trans-border, inter-national and global perspectives simultaneously with local cultural specificities and national motivation. Analyzing textual features, historicities and symptoms in comparison with other similar instances of world cinema would be suggested as an effective model of approaching alternative cinema in India and other non-Western countries.

References:

¹See Stephen Teo, 'Asian Cinematic Practice – Towards an Alternative Paradigm', a paper presented at the international conference organized by National University of Singapore, 6-7 March, 2007.

²ibid

³ibid

⁴ibid

⁵ibid

⁶See 'New Cinema Movement', extract from the manifesto of the New Cinema Movement issued by Mrinal Sen, chairman and Arun Kaul, chief promoter, *Close Up*, no.1, July 1968.

⁷ibid

⁸ibid

⁹See Teshome H. Gabriel, 'Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Cinema' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994.

¹⁰Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to Emergency*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2009.

¹¹Subhjit Chatterjee, review of Ashish Rajadhyaksha's book 'The Ontology of Indian Cinema', *The Book Review*, March 2010, p.30.

¹²Rajadhyaksha, *op cit.*, p.319.

¹³*Ibid*, pp.219-230.

¹⁴Teo, *op cit.*