



Day One, Session One
Presentation 1

Teaching Film Studies In India : Curricula and Crises

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The first university programme in film studies was launched in India, and to my knowledge, in south Asia, in this institution in 1993. Since then, many undergraduate colleges in West Bengal, I think there are nine colleges in Bengal, have started what we call pass courses which are undergraduate subsidiary courses, (now they are called general courses) in Film Studies. CSCS Bangalore (PhD), JNU and Delhi (M.A, M. Phil, PhD) and English and Foreign Languages University (M.A, PhD) from where Madhava Prasad comes, have joined over the last decade with their postgraduate programmes. The more curious part of the expansion scenario is, however, assimilation of film studies modules- mostly in film history and film theory- in the proliferating popular courses in media and communication across the country. So that's the more curious part where for example the media science course- I don't know exactly how they came and arrived at the name- but there is something called the media science course offered in West Bengal, where they have actually modules in film theory and film history. So that has happened on a large scale almost throughout the country.

For a long time after the establishment of the department at Jadavpur, we

had to explain to our colleagues, students, officials what we were doing. So, it was an exercise one had to go through for a long time. Had to tell them it was not film-making, for example, and it wasn't film appreciation. The second was the more difficult task. The irksome business actually helped us reflect on our work. We developed summary responses. We do not teach film making, we would say. Do literature departments teach how to write novels? This later proved to be counter intuitive, I will tell you why. We work with films, we said, in the way they work in the literature departments on language and its forms of expression. This is not film appreciation, we said, appreciation is primarily arts and aesthetics oriented; it comes from the art appreciation model. We treat cinema as cultural and social practice, we do not confine ourselves to artistic milestones and great authors, etc. We also explained to the more patient the difference between 'Film Study' and 'Film Studies'- that studies has its protocols of learning, its authoritative books, its standardized methodology and its institutional sites- that it has a set of disciplinary norms. Needless to the say, the last was and still is unacceptable to the film critics working from non-institutional sites, mostly in the press and film society forums. Well-known critics (just to recount the story for those who do not know it or do not remember) wrote editorials and articles urging the state not to give sanction to our department when it was proposed to the University Grants Commission (UGC). The divide widened with new theoretical scholarship on Indian Cinema appearing from the late 1980's on.

The reason we are holding this colloquium is that we have started stuttering with those pat answers and responses. The very status of our primary object, film, the sites and technologies of knowledge production about that object and the relationship between critical and artistic practices have all undergone major transformations since we began with this minority occupation . It is not easy, given our system of pre-approved curricular teaching , to incorporate changes as they come along. The best one can do is to point to the crisis of given discourses even as one teaches them, and, in terms of the empirical material brought into discussion, re-adjust our focus. As we study 'Non-western cinemas', with the students, for example, we can turn to the new Asian cinemas from Japanese classics or New Latin American Cinema that we had been teaching. But that does not itself bring about a change in content, a conceptual revision of the course, or change in teaching methods. I think what we have been mostly doing so far is respond to the new situation, the transformations I mentioned just now, by incorporation of new material, and by occasionally pointing to the inadequacies that we find in our critical equipment. But it is

difficult to name the crisis in the first place. Have we come to a consensus that there is a crisis? I think we shall have time to reflect on this very basic issues.

It might be useful to begin with the experience of classroom teaching itself. That's what we are concerned with more than anything else. As Anindya just mentioned a while ago, we are actually in the process of revising the syllabus. So the experience of classroom teaching since 1993 have to be probably taken into account .The students themselves were never fully convinced, at least not all of them, that they were meant to study cinema and not learn about filmmaking from us. Many went on to become filmmakers and script writers, a large number have been absorbed in the TV industry, and some have enrolled in film schools like Pune Film Institute and Satyajit Ray Film Institute in Calcutta. One was aware that what we learn does feed into the imagination of films to come, not only to reception. For example, the literature department analogy was not really accurate. In the sense that the whole history of modern literature, including modern Indian literature, showed that actually people from literature departments have gone on to become poets, critics, novelists, and so on. And we have an eminent example in Jadavpur itself, the Comparative Literature department which was the first of its kind, once again, on the subcontinent about fifty seven years ago. They started in the face of similar criticism, more virulent criticism where actually some of the important poets of the post-Tagore generation started the department and framed its initial curricula.

So it does feed into the imagination of films, what we teach. But it was not possible, given our orientation and resources, to develop on the axis of contact between criticism and production. Neither the orientation nor resources would permit that. Our analogy with literature was also problematic. In the last half decade, with availability of cheap digital technology, a situation has arisen where a growing number of students come to us with experience of making independent home- made films, sometimes made through informal collectives. A new gap has opened up between the constituency and the humanities language that we speak. The question is not only if we should include training in filmmaking in the curricula; though that is a question. That is not exactly what we are concerned with right now. It is a question of responding to the social life of the object we are concerned with. When almost everyone has turned into a potential producer of the image, the constitutive distance between film and its audience is reduced and re-ordered. It has been part of the programme of informatized capitalism to make audio-visual production an essential part of the data flow on which it is based. The logic of convergence has progressively

brought together modes of communication on one platform. The mobile phone is the best example of this. The same drive in the economic and technological sphere has also produced the possibility of storage of huge amount of image and sound on private equipment, signifying the reduction of the distance between experience and record-keeping. All this has meant a situation where people can use videos as letters and notes to be exchanged, as a means of conversation. The institutional forms of film that we study usually have not been replaced by this proliferation, but their uses and contexts have been replaced, have started changing in a major way, all of which is not technologically determined. Cinema if one can hazard the formulation, is becoming language in a new sense, as something that can be used on an ordinary basis by a community of users.

This matters even for standard film analysis in the classroom. If one were to teach, for example, Kiarostami's recent films, which he had been shooting with cheap digital cameras, and the kind of work that is being done parallelly to that, or something like more recent experience Apichatpong's *Uncle Boonmee*, one has to take into consideration the independent video, still photography, art installation and media based activity these filmmakers are engaged in, that feed directly into their feature films. *Uncle Boonmee*, the Apichatpong film I mentioned just now, is a film that those of you haven't seen will get a chance to see in the coming film festival at Calcutta. *Uncle Boonmee* comes out of a New Media project that Apichatpong has been creating on his native village for some years. You can see the examples from the Internet— videos, stills, stories. In the everyday practice of film, one is not necessarily making films, not everybody has turned into a filmmaker in that sense, though that is also a reality—witness the mushrooming of digital tribal film making in many corners of India, from Malegaon to Manipur, from Ladakh to Purulia. The more significant development perhaps is the autonomy that filmic elements and processes, for example just editing, take on through amateur practice. Audio-visual entities are not necessarily stories and documentaries now. One can edit others' footage, alter and sample images and soundtracks. The study of film form is faced with this challenge. We are still largely busy studying the form. But there is something else to it. As the possibility of practical thinking and argumentation through the filmic material itself becomes real, the boundary between scholarship and creative practices does not look so secure any more. Thinking of India itself, we can look at the work of Camp in Bombay or Raqs Media Collective in Delhi. These artists have adopted a method of working with moving images that evolves into critical commentaries and histories. If

sampling, classification, annotation, etc, are part of academic research, the initiative has partly been taken over by artists who are developing critical databases such as [Oxldb](#) or [Pad.ma](#) where actually through certain searches we can see the development of generic forms over time. We see conventions, for example lighting codes develop over time. We can see them arranged side by side on a timeline just through a search. Software has incorporated what we are laboring to do in the class.

The learner who is potentially a practitioner is likely to be interested in altering the state of things, to remove the deficiency of what she sees, to formulate principles. That's what the learner is likely to be interested in. A question, probably peculiar to the Indian situation or the South Asian situation, is to how to connect with this demand of altering, removing deficiency, creating new principles, imagining the films to come for a critical discourse that has largely confined itself to analysis and description of the industrial product, and has retreated from the task of evaluation.

This brings us to another reply which we used to give. Our contention that we don't teach film only as art but as culture. That was the answer. In practice, we have stopped being concerned about art. The stigma of elitism that any such concern has acquired in South Asian film scholarship is a matter that needs to be addressed in detail, but the old mission of understanding popular culture runs the risk of deracination in the context of new cinephilia. We receive in the classroom a new breed of students who are conversant with contemporary films from across the world as members of DVD sharing groups, or as Bit Torrent harvesters of the riches of the world cinema. They partake of the knowledge that circulates in the digital commons— Wikipedia, blogs, free magazines, websites and discussion forums, which have made part of our traditional business in the classroom redundant. They sometimes come to the classroom knowing more about conventions, genres, authors and films. The cinephiliac sites of film education are deeply invested in the artistic adventure, in aesthetic achievements. Appreciation is central to this knowledge production. In this contribution 'The Core and Flow of Film Studies' to the *Critical Inquiry* two years ago (Summer 2009), Dudley Andrew has reminded us of the illuminating episode of the Filmologie movement in France. Bazin was at his harshest ever in denouncing attempts of Gilbert Cohen-Seat and his colleagues in Filmologie to institute the study of film in the university along the lines of human and social sciences. They were doing psychology of cinema, physiology of cinema etc. They tried to do that in the 50's. The contention was that the academic scholar of the film was not interested in films; cinema for them was

a frozen thing to be dissected; they never watched 500 films in a year like the *Cahiers* critics, or felt and experienced them in the same intimate way. Theoretical scholarship in film had to mark a break with the vagueness of personal aesthetic judgments and journalistic waffle. As we mentioned in the beginning, a small chapter of this friction unfolded in our own neighborhoods as critics emerging from the film society movement felt the university programme was a useless project of jargon production. Has a new moment arrived when the university has to build up a conversation with the new informal sites of knowledge production?

Mutations within film studies scholarship have played their own role in bringing about a sense of inadequacy with regard to the categorical basics of our discipline. That's another side altogether, but it has happened in tandem with the change of the status of film. In a fundamental way the point of departure for film studies was the break that the Western theoretical work the late 1960's ushered in. Once serious disaffections (from late 70's but clearly from mid 80's onwards) began to emerge with its familiar English crop, the Screen Theory as we came to call it, as writings in the journal responsible for that name themselves show, eclecticism took hold. Only a handful of authors care to articulate the theoretical premise from which they work; either because they work from a mix of approaches, often incompatible with each other in their original formulations, or because a large body of research is now archival in nature, local histories of institutions, trends and reception, etc., which seem to able to float free of theoretical anchors, or, better, try to develop a conceptual bricolage suited to the object at hand. Exceptions remain. Deleuzian and phenomenological schools, for example, have produced theoretical models of some ambition – Laura Marks and Vivian Sobchack's recent work could be cited for the two schools respectively, but it is not common to come by work in theory as such.

We do not only teach a body of work done in film studies, or aspects of the cinematic phenomenon, we do not only do that, we teach the discipline itself. It becomes difficult to spell out the premises of a study in circumstances of conceptual hybridity. We shall have occasion to turn to the question in the coming sessions, but let me end by putting a question on the table. This of course is a problem of the model. Does the crisis run deeper than this? It's not a new question, it's just to put it before you so that at some point we have the scope to take it up. Our analytical language stands upon a separation of material and trace, object and representation. It comes from the first moment of crisis of representation in the twentieth century. We still begin by asking

the student to distinguish between the cinematic and pro-filmic facts. In a reality that tends increasingly to fold the first of these terms upon the second, where the inter-penetration of social life and representations is intensified many times over by the ubiquity and banality of representations, we have begun to suffer from a crisis of the critical language itself, not only from a loss of models of criticism. How far is this a problem of the critical disciplines in general? To what extent is it peculiar to Film Studies, stemming from the radical relocation of film itself in social life?

I end my ramble at this point as questions have begun to outweigh propositions. My only hope is that this might well be a moment of renewal, when we can re-fashion the tools we have and create new ones at the same time. But more importantly, we are enjoined to think from the perspective of the specific crisis of representation that we face. The first moment of crisis of representation in twentieth century, if I have understood it correctly, was basically philosophical and aesthetic in nature. And what we are going through now is more economic and social in nature. So that in order to fashion a new kind of analytical language that can adequate itself to this kind of phenomenon one would be forced to think from one's perspective to a large extent. Critical tools and language are universalizable, it is not a kind of an argument for localization of knowledge and so on. It's a kind of situation where the hopeful thing is that we will be enjoined to think from the specific crisis that in our own situation representation has fallen into.

Thank You.