



Day One, Session One
Presentation 4

Teaching Film Theory 1

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Thank you, I teach film sometimes, not all the time, at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad and in fact it's been a while since I taught a course in film. We became a University a few years back and in the process we all got reorganized into new departments. As a result there is now a Film Studies department and a Cultural Studies department. Ashish [Rajadhyaksha] was referring to the period when this was happening and indeed as he said the choice was between where film was going to be located, whether it was going to be located along with cultural studies in an interdisciplinary program or as part of a media school. So that was actually the nature of choice, not whether film making will be taught which is a different question, so as a result people made choices according to whether they wanted to be in a media school, whether we had the necessary interest and ability to function effectively in a Media School or not and so on. It is true that at the time I was the only person holding a position in film at the University, but I had no part in the decision making. That is the moment when I choose to be in the Cultural Studies program.

So, the question of whether or not film studies students should learn film

making, is easily answered: of course they should, if they could: to have handled the equipment, to acquire competence in wielding the camera or editing or any other branch can only be beneficial to the critical faculty. But the trouble is, given the institutional set up that you have, you cannot incorporate something like that into the Film Studies program without at the same time getting trapped in a kind of positivist frame of Mass Communication studies. In other words while agreeing that it's a good idea to conceive a program combining film studies with some kind of introduction to film making, as I believe some universities are trying to do, I also conceive of the 'film studies' part of it as essentially a humanistic discipline. I mean you have to fundamentally answer this question why study instead of watching and I don't believe that there are reasons that fall outside of the Humanities framework. So that is the context in which my thoughts on teaching film theory are presented.

I teach film theory or I should say taught, since I no longer teach it, in a rather simple way, in a context where students come to do introductory courses at the beginning of their M.A. programs, based on a model that I am familiar with from the University of Pittsburgh where I have studied. We had divided the introductory courses into film history and theory on one hand and film analysis on the other. It's a good model. Film theory, in that kind of model would be taught in the modality of history of thought or thinking about cinema. So actually it's an entirely historically oriented course but always emphasizing the analytical sort of approach to history. Therefore someone like Dudley Andrew works perfectly well for me because what is important there is the distinctions that he introduces into this history of thinking about cinema. You can always supplement Andrew with little samples of the original writings and that always helps but it actually makes very good sense, at least given the kind of students we do have, to use a text like that which emphasizes the importance of making distinctions, classifying the material at hand. What we essentially want to learn is what is the character of the thinking then what are the issues, what are the problems that they were concerned with and what in retrospect can be said about it. So in that sense it's a film theory course posed in a historical perspective, in a 'history of thought' model'. I am saying 'history of thought' because I want to emphasize that I consider it as a humanities discipline by which I mean that the primary object of a discipline in the humanities is not really either literature or cinema or any other given object so much as the intelligence of the taught subject, the mind of the student, that's really the only object in humanities. Humanities I don't believe has an object in spite of the fact that of course there are scientific approaches to the study of literature

for instance, which create new object, you know ‘the literary’ and so on which is an aspect which one can at some stage arrive at. But I believe training the mind is the primary purpose in order to do further advanced work on different aspects of cinema or the other developments that have followed since. Talking about those developments, I was reading something by the scholar Lev Manovich who was trying to make sense of the advent of the digital and what it does to the cinema and the entire essay, actually unconsciously without realizing that this is what is happening, reproduces, rehearses all the arguments of the early 20th century modernist schools, Constructivist, Futurist, and so on about the image but on the occasion of the arrival of digital cinema. So it’s like one really does not know how to think about this new thing except by going back. So the difficulty is that the ‘new’ is not going to come with its own thought. For instance there is this problem about whether pictures speak by themselves, and if so what do they say, what is distinctive about them? (Jacques Ranciere has some interesting things to say about this in *The Future of the Image*). My belief is they don’t really say much by themselves unless you speak for them, you have to speak, you have to produce the narratives in which they find a place and that holds for all forms, whether its technology or new kind of cultural forms.

Therefore there are two or three ways in which you can conceive the teaching of film theory keeping in mind that your aim is to really train the subject to be able to deal with cinema or any other cultural material. One is, as I said, to use Dudley Andrew or any other convenient and interesting argument around film theory by bringing in other materials dealing with other aspects which are not purely theoretical such as issues of the national cinema or the third cinema question, genre and so on which supplement the core theoretical issues. Secondly there is the specific question of India and the nature of students, mostly very heterogeneous batches of often untrained students depending on your specific location. Indeed sometimes there would be students without knowledge or even experience of watching films because they are not really being allowed to watch films but they want to do it now.

So one way to approach it is to make it a problem of form, orient it around a question of form, basically you want to reinforce the idea of formal aspects of cinema as constituting the more important and difficult object for understanding than other aspects of it like the literary, the musical, the content, etc. So if you work around that kind of a practical problem it allows for a selective use of film theoretical knowledge in the classroom to work with specific texts and thereby get acquainted with the practical consequences of

some kind of theory. This obviously is not going to provide a comprehensive encyclopedic type of introduction but I believe in the age of internet and Wikipedia it's not really necessary for us to do that, you can always guide a student to some of those sources, to use the internet before they actually get around to studying it. In fact you could say that there is a surfeit of knowledge of this kind, you can now 'know' pretty much everything there is. Then there is the question of turning away from 70's film theory. Obviously the turn as far as the 70's theory is concerned is a small turn but regarding the things that are supposed to be coming to take its place it is symptomatic that we keep repeatedly turning away from 70's theory and that's because our own critical intelligence is only able to pose the diversity of something new against the old rather than actually concretely make a positive sort of passage into the new production of knowledge.

So these are the problems that arise when you think about the mind of the student and what we are supplying to that and what we are training. Apart from this form question, which I was mentioning, especially in Hyderabad as I have experienced, it is Indian cinema that is really the representative domain of experience. We have to end up there finally. In the theory and history course we would include a set of World Cinema titles, some illustrations of national styles, go over the rise of the film festival, the art cinema etc. We cover that and then come to more recent times and then basically end up with Indian cinema. Apart from that there are special topics, like what Colin [MacCabe] is doing now, a course on Clint Eastwood and America; a course on literature and film; a national cinema, New German cinema, Iranian cinema. While there is interest in such courses and the course on 'Literature into Film' was one of the most satisfying that I have taught, for the most part we are dealing with students who are familiar with and interested in Indian cinema. So that is another way in which you can then organize this introduction into film theory. You have to work it into a course which works with Indian cinema. Now in order to do that it is useful to make this combination of film theory with this cinema and then you will be able to locate Indian cinema in a global context and discuss the specific character of this relationship partly because, in spite of all the critical commentary on the ideas of the national cinema, we do tend to treat it as one national cinema among others which itself is a big problem for the theoretical sort of understanding of cinema itself.

So the theory part has combined with this Indian cinema orientation and talking about the theoretical issues only in relation to those films you get into questions of say, the internationalism of the early film makers, recently some

arguments are being made about that but also about the question of heterogeneous time and you get to know what is Indian cinema and in what way is it related to other national cinemas or world cinema. And how is the colonial relation actually featuring there as a determining factor which is one very important element to my knowledge. Because if you want to come to understand the character and what gives this specific character to Indian cinema and its many diverse forms within India, where many mini national cinemas that constitute the total thing that we call the Indian cinema coexist, then I believe that some of that discussion has to happen around the question of the colonial determination. Therein lies the impossibility of treating it as a national cinema not because it's a bad idea to talk about a national cinema. In any case there is an affirmative question which I believe needs to be addressed about whether we are dealing with heterogeneity or is it a question of developmental time lags. What I have observed is a tendency to suppress this question in order to assert some false parity between national cinemas which I don't think does much to inculcate the critical spirit in our students.

I guess I am saying that the practical aim of improving the quality of the students' abilities as we find them in the concrete here and now should be the basis for arriving at a suitable education in film. So there is a very urgent need to try and reflect on the addressee of our efforts, the student. Who is the person? This is a serious question. One cannot devise programs independently of that consideration and it's not easy to conceive it either. I mean you might have the intention to do so but actually when you try to do so it's not easy to actually succeed in meeting this challenge. Because as I see it, in the Indian context we have encouraged a very strong separation of faculties in terms of assigning the cognitive analytical faculty entirely to the sciences and social sciences and making humanities essentially the site of imagination. Also if you look at educational theories sometimes they tend to overemphasize the importance of imagination in the life of the child. I believe that there are some historical reasons for that but whatever it is you can see the effects of it in the kind of preparation you come with. Sometimes it is absolutely paralyzing because you need to get a job done but you don't know how to do it. I have also come to believe increasingly that there is this other problem which is that even if everybody is endowed with similar abilities we have this problem of language and that is the biggest obstacle. It's not really the thought in many cases. Most people will be able to relate to the thought if it wasn't for the fact that they just don't know the language enough to be able to make sense of it. I guess what I am presenting is a picture of education which may not be true

in every place. But it is true in some of the places that at least I have seen and sometimes when you don't have the problem and things go well you tend to think that everything is fine. I would like to emphasize that there should be a focus on the Indian cinema which is one way in which you can possibly begin to work around this problem. But of course that is also not so easy because you can't really teach in anything but the English medium in India because otherwise you have a diversity of languages.

Now, this whole new situation which Moinak Biswas spoke about, that there is access to lot of world cinema and a lot of new kind of thinking going on. I have heard about and even seen such developments but I am not very familiar with the exact nature of these non-institutional, non-academic, fragmentary forms of thinking that have emerged. Because whatever it may be the University will have to focus on the intellectual achievement as something that is acquired, sustained, talked about and reproduced and what difference does it make to the existing common sense about any specific object. This is one reason why I would not simply say that there is something out there which forces us to accommodate to this change. Because it's not the objects that are assaulting us that constitute the source of our knowledge, it's the desire for knowledge that then identifies the object that can help us to become more knowledgeable, more capable, more analytically able to deal with so much diversity or confusion or whatever it is. And that's why I think when I mentioned that Dudley Andrew is a good enough text for me, the reason for that is it provides an analytical framework. You can teach it and then you can break with it. You go from existing knowledge to new knowledge in a way that the object itself is not determining. You know, some objects out there are not determining the passage because that is more rigorously sustained by intellectual considerations which are considerations of the mind of the student as the object.

Thank You!