Day One, Session Two
Presentation 5

Teaching Film Theory 2

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One of the legends at the Indian Institute of Science, as apparently in some other science institutions, is that when new students join, all that happens is that the faculty explains to students the current research interests of the Department. It is assumed that students will pick up from these concerns their own research interests. For much of the time that the student does his or her doctoral work, s/he works in the Department, publishes individually and collectively the research that s/he is involved in, and assembles this into a doctoral thesis. I am not sure this happens quite like that in practice, but I like the idea.

And so, here at the Department of Film Studies, speaking about the teaching of film theory, in this extremely familiar location and amid the many friends in this room, I too am going to primarily lay out what it is that is bothering me, and leave it at that. Let me see if what my concerns are can be extended into a larger conversation about the teaching of film theory courses.

A few preliminary propositions. First, let me suggest that this entire digital/ celluloid divide as commonly discussed is a somewhat simplistic division: that it hides a whole set of complex confrontations between the two technologies,

and perhaps *within* celluloid technologies themselves. Second, we are already looking at two if not three generations of digital technologies: so the problem now needs to be dethroned from its eternal 'newness': this is no longer a new divide. Digital platforms of an earlier period are right now themselves in danger of being obsolete, and thus the problem that celluloid material has posed before archivists – namely that, contrary to our imagination, the colour films of the 1960s-70s are much more in danger of being lost than nitrate which, popularly imagined to have been in the greatest danger, is demonstrating amazing resilience – may well be replayed on digital platforms too, as we encounter their own obsolescence.

We are therefore looking at a situation in which the legacy of our cinema is far more complex than we realize, and the role of academic work in perpetuating this legacy appears to be far more central than we have ever imagined. I want to make a distinction here: between restoring and perpetuating, to me perpetuating is *putting to new use* – including new platforms, new devices – the kind of material that we all collectively study, and I want to specifically explore the role that academic work plays here. Let me start with the fairly standard 'housekeeping' responsibilities that any film academic conventionally plays, similar to housekeeping responsibilities of say a historian, including something as basic as footnoting correctly, or ensuring that references are appropriate and, going forward, ensuring that original materials as well as their copies have been archived, negotiating with archivists as to how these can be made intelligently accessible. For any film theorist today the responsibilities we all share include handling personal copies of various films, sharing these, frame-grabbing, making clips etc. These are archival responsibilities, and until the other day were handled by professionals inside film archives but today are handles by all of us, using applications that are bundled into standard Apple and Windows platforms. As a result of this work, I further think that the theory-practice divisions that have occupied so much thinking this morning may perhaps be a bit of a false division given the fact that all of us in the process of being film theorists are also film-editors of a kind: we grab, we clip, we re-juxtapose materials, we do all sorts of things even at the simplest level of a Nero or VLC software. I am moving to I-movie because the Apple environment is something that I am trying to explore more and more, and as Colin MacCabe pointed out this morning, I am using technologies that are now available to all of us at our doorstep but which were just until the other day specialist technologies belonging to specialist knowledge and of course were extremely expensive.

Currently, I am in the process of curating a film event which is going to happen in China and as a result of that I have been in touch with some faculty from the Beijing Film Academy. I was personally surprised to note that the BFA has a full-scale literature department: we are going to show our films under this Department. When I mentioned my surprise to Mikhail Iampolsky, he told me that this was copied from the Moscow Film School, and indeed that Moscow had briefly hired Eisenstein in the Literature department for a while. This was news to me. I did not know that the Moscow Film School had a Literature Department or that Eisenstein was a crucial figure in setting it up and I think, to that specific extent, the kind of interaction especially on the *topos* of *conservation*, *archiving* and *perpetuation* of material that filmmakers have had and film theorists have had, certainly suggests an overlap that ought to be recovered as we start to explore what I think is an overstated theory-practice divide which seems to beset all these departments. I refer here to the humanities versus film school problem that seems to commonly exist, which certainly needs re-visiting as we look at it historically.

Moving on, and borrowing from the idea of what has come to be known as 'ubiquitous computing', where the ubiquity of computing as part of everyday life could actually replace physical computers as we know them, I want to explore the idea of a ubiquitous cinema: to see whether the twentieth century was something of a pre-history to what we are encountering today with the moving image. As Laura Mulvey has pointed out, the quality of attention that we are today able to give to a celluloid film when we see it on a digital platform – when we can stop it, start it, re-wind it, bring to it an attention that nobody in the twentieth century could have possibly given it, not even specialists working on Steenbecks. This effectively means we are giving even material produced in the twentieth century a degree of attention that it may not itself have had at the time it was made. Some time ago I and Moinak Biswas were in New York at a conference that coincided with a film retrospective of Satyajit Ray and I was interested in the kind of material being put out in that retrospective. They have restored *Pather Panchali* which is like no *Pather Panchali* you have ever seen. It's a totally twenty-first century *Panther Panchali* that's been redone with technologies and materials that nobody would have seen, certainly not Subrata Mitra. It seemed to me, as I saw that film, that we were looking at a change that is taking place for which the dates are not yet fixed, or indeed a history of celluloid for which we have yet to work out many things, where this came from or what it did.

Attaching this level of attention to the concept of ubiquitous cinema

involving the role of cinema in everyday life, takes us to another dimension of the problem. Ubiquitous cinema is not a new concept, and it is similar to Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto's idea of 'trans cinema', in which you actually have the moving image entering everyday life, virtually all around you. This happens most obviously around East Asia where you constantly have moving image materials in street corners, on hoardings and all over the place. One specific experiment of trans-cinema was conducted in South Korea, called the Clip City Project, where they actually put out on 40 and 80 foot hoardings which are actually gigantic LCD screens featuring art videos (see Kim Soyoung's recent films for that experience). This was done with the idea that there is nothing to prevent what used to be cinema from entering those kinds of spaces which were previously only occupied by certain forms of advertising and commodification. I want also to link such spaces for the cinema with the concept of a digital ecosystem: something related in turn to the idea of the person as a 'data-subject'.

I want to mention one quick point. This is something that I actually originally produced for Colin MacCabe's Colonial Cinemas Conference in London, one of the most memorable that I have ever attended. In 1926 the Imperial Economic Conference took place. This was an important development in the history of the empire, attempting to create from an earlier form of colonialism a new economic entity, an economic commonwealth that would now rule the empire. As we see the many entities that featured at that point which we would today call the 'eco-system' - governmental trade development, agricultural research, working compensation, taxation and so on associated with technologies such as long distance wireless, telephone, passports and the phase that we are going to talk about: exhibition of 'empire films'. As you see in this list (in the PowerPoint), the second line is to do with shipping and civil aviation. If we see all these phenomena – shipping, aviation, taxes, passports – as all collectively linked to the invention and dissemination of the cinematic moving image, it would seem that some of the components of what we are now calling the *digital* ecosystem are actually already present at this time as ubiquitous cinema, and that such cinema is not that new, and it would probably go back a long way once we start framing a research object or agenda you might say, of the present.

This is really my preliminary statement. I want to focus this presentation on a specific problem that bothers me and that is not so much what happens to digital films regardless of when they were originally shot, on celluloid or not, but films that were transited on to a digital platform and which can be

perpetuated on that platform. There are already enough problems even with that kind of material: films made on digital platforms in the early 2000s are already in danger of technological obsolescence and need to be restored. But here I am not referring to material made originally on digital platforms, I refer to material that was made on celluloid and is finding a hard time of transiting onto a digital platform. Now this is a specific problem that is confronting archivists, and I am interested in the roles that *theory* play in perpetuating such material.

We have multiple problems here: let me explain these with a little experiment in which I was recently involved. Let me start with the obvious fact that the cinema that was made at the time we grew up, the kind of cinema we admired, was made on celluloid platforms and that today we do not see it on these platforms. A filmmaker like Mani Kaul was making films with film industry-level budgets since that was how much stock, or lab charges cost – as against say the visual arts economy of the time that was made with a fraction of that cost – and showing his films in a mainstream auditorium alongside mainstream Hindi commercial films because that was the only place he had to show such films, apart from the film society. On the other hand, the art market was so underdeveloped that a filmmaker had no other options, despite the fact that the visual artist of that time was very much a fellow-traveller of the independent filmaker. Over the decades this situation has changed dramatically –film-making has become cheaper and cheaper, virtually free, and the art economy has grown considerably. And so new technologies have been far more easily adopted by experimental video makers exhibiting in art gallery spaces than by filmmakers showing in mainstream auditoria. Today you actually have documentary filmmakers finding their work far more hospitably received in an art space than in a movie theatre. Which leads me to my question: what if I showed celluloid, or some later-day version of it, in an art space? I had an opportunity to try this with the cinema of Mani Kaul: last month, I curated an Art Biennial in Guangzhou, better known by its colonial name, Canton, where I showed Kaul alongside artworks of Ranbir Singh Kaleka, in a way which allowed people to walk in and out of the films at any point of their choice. Now I don't know if Mani Kaul, had he been alive would have approved or not. But I did it and let me draw attention to some of these images.

Helping me was filmmaker and cinematographer Avijit Mukul Kishore, and these are his photographs. So what we did was we created a completely new space that would have been a completely alien experience for a filmmaker of the 70's. A black box, it was an enormous space, eighteen meters by eighteen

meters. So you can see Mani Kaul's *Arrival* (1980) running and on the right *Sweet Unease* (Ranbir Singh Kaleka, 2010) on the left. Here is a gigantic four screen work Ranbir Kaleka had done in which he projects video images upon paintings, images which are often of documentary kind, and there is *Dhrupad* (1983) on the right, and *Siddheswari* (1990).

This was obviously an extremely difficult thing to do. I was not sure that I knew what I was doing, I was not sure that one understood the ramification of such an exercise. But I wanted to attempt a few things. I wanted in the first place to relocate what I understood was celluloid film onto a different location. The second thing is that I wanted to link, picking up Madhava Prasad's point this morning, the interrogation of form also into the interrogation of the platform. I believe that film theory has always dealt with these kinds of questions and I also would draw your attention to the extent of technological knowledge you need to know to be able to do film theory: say, the properties of Eastman stock or of certain kind of lenses, which film theorists have known about and have used. But here, in the video space I was in, the knowledges I needed to make this experiment happen were not familiar to me. I will say a little bit more about these.

When we decided to use this experimental format I chose three films of Mani Kaul, all made in the 80's: *Arrival*, *Sidheswari* and *Dhrupad*. *Arrival* is an interesting film; it's actually a fifteen minute short that Kaul had made for the Films Division. This was a montage comprising of a series of clips in which he made numerous references, including one particular to Truffaut, the fax machine sequence from *The Bride Wore Black* (1968) as well as other references. Unfortunately, Mani Kaul, after he made this particular film, had been forced by the Films Division to add a voice-over commentary although it was intended to be a wordless film. As far as I remember, he took some lines from Marx's *Capital* and he got the newsreader Luku Sanyal to do the voice-over. There was also some rumor that Mani Kaul himself had created a Hindi version with his own words. We did not want any of these and were looking for the original wordless version and to our great surprise we actually found it. Strangely Films Division themselves were not aware of the wordless version and they gave it to us along with *Siddeshwari* and *Dhrupad*. It was rather curious that *Sidheswari* being the most watched of these three was the poorest in terms of the transfer. *Dhrupad* was less so and *Arrival* was the cleanest of the three.

When we saw the films we realized that we were looking at extremely poor quality, low resolution DigiBeta versions of the films. So what does one do now, we wondered. You are not looking at the original film itself, you are

looking at this version. I was not only anxious about taking Mani Kaul into an art space but I was also equally anxious about how such degraded versions of his own work could show alongside contemporary visual artists for instance like Ranbir Singh Kaleka.

Kaleka, who might be familiar to many of you here, is a painter who paints on a canvas and upon the painting he projects video. So, for example in his artwork *Man Threading a Needle* (1998-99) he paints a man threading a needle and projects a video sequence on it: but the sequence is virtually without movement. So we have this man attempting to thread a needle and he doesn't move except that his eyelids would blink a little or there would be some absolute minimum movement elsewhere. Alongside that I was trying to show Mani Kaul and the sound would surely spill over, which I was hoping the *Dhrupad* form would be able to handle. But when we got these very poor quality images I needed some reassurance I wasn't doing something terrible, so I took it to Piyush Shah who is the cinematographer of *Siddeshwari* and I asked him what he could do about it. He said that he wasn't going to let me show this film unless he had chance to restore it. So he took the DigiBeta and he dumped the whole thing onto his own PC. And he spent two and a half weeks cleaning up the films. Now comes the really interesting problem. Piyush Shah is the original cinematographer of *Siddeshwari*, a film which had used the technology known as 'pre-flashing' which may be of great importance to film theorists. To put it in the simplest way, 'pre-flashing' constitutes of a slight pre-exposure to the film positive which increases its sensitivity immensely. So the resultant situation is where the blacks are actually considerably more enhanced than the straight transfer would allow. This was how Piyush Shah experimented with the technology of pre-flashing which was also known as 'pre-fogging', I think, in the late 1980s. So now Piyush receives a DigiBeta of that same film and says that "I have to reinvent the concept of pre-flashing on a digital platform." What Piyush Shah is now working with is no longer the original celluloid, which is technically dead. However, he rationalizes that he is no longer attempting to *restore* the celluloid film but rather create a *digital variant* of his celluloid film.

I want to pause here and want to tell you something about this. On the screen on the left, we have the original version and on the right is the restored Piyush Shah version. For the most part on the left hand side of the left image what you are getting is what film historians remember as magenta or 'tomato sauce' as it is known popularly . This is known as 'celluloid leakage' where the cool colours wear off and only the reds remain. The blue on the right hand

side, on the other hand, is not a celluloid decay version. The blue on the right is actually to do with the impoverishment of the *digital* version, and may have been even introduced in the telecine transfer. Shah was extremely concerned then about actually cleaning up the digital errors that had been brought into it.

Piyush Shah had wondered as to whether it could be because of the poor quality of the DigiBeta transfer that he had, or even if you go back to the original film print and having a further transfer done with his own supervision, would get rid of the blue on the right. But he thinks not and we are proceeding as historians with the assumptions as what Films Division has given us and what they are going to give us. I believe that the bureaucracy has once again changed. And even this he has got you may not be able to get. These then were the sorts of aesthetic and technological struggles that Piyush Shah went through and confessed that this is the best that he could do with restoration as it cannot be of a very high quality given the technical constraints.

After Mani Kaul's passing away there's been a whole interest in his work and much speculations that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has financially invested money to take the celluloid films and do a 2k or 4k restoration, and put these back on celluloid screens. Two things here: one is we don't know if and when this will happen. Secondly the condition of some of the original negatives is itself in dispute. And the third and the most important thing is course until that happens we are stuck with the digital versions. I am very interested in the kind of issues and concerns that Piyush has brought in helping us in making the distinction between 'restoring a film' as against 'perpetuating' it, which constitutes the act of translating it on to a new canvas.

We have also dome some work on the sound by Madhu Apsara, who actually said that he would need about ten years of work just to clean up the sound. The version that he now has, problematic as it is, is at least better than the presently circulating versions of Mani Kaul's work. I want to conclude however with a further experiment that I conducted, I am happy or unhappy to tell you that even now Piyush Shah is unaware of this further experiment that I have conducted and I don't know if he is going to approve of it. That experiment is of projecting Kaul's films on a dark grey wall. I have actually asked film makers whether they are aware of the possibility of projecting on screens that are not white. So far no filmmaker I know has said he or she is aware of it, but visual artists are all too aware of the fact that projecting on dark grey screens actually enhances the texture, the deeper tones for example. This I learned from Kaleka who explained that the visual artists for a long time have been working with

non-white screens. I don't know the examples in film history whether there's been ever any debate on screen colour, on whether you can actually screen on surfaces other than white. Kaleka claims this is partly because the very quality of video black is fundamentally different from the quality of celluloid black.

Because celluloid black works with intensities, the more black it gets the lesser the light that goes through .Video doesn't work like that since regardless of the colour the video light that goes through is of the same quality and intensity. So actually there is a kind of translation of structure of information that now needs to be visually rendered.

We spent a lot of time and effort in trying to figure out exactly which kind of grey wall was going to work best, and we projected this particular film on to the grey wall you see above. There are some very hilarious production stills when we have greys of various humans on the wall and there are some whites as well. At worst it would be seen as a little bit faint and little bit hazy but in fact had a kind of intensity which would otherwise not be there.

This was really what I wanted to say to you, to present this kind of material an instance of the sorts of issue as that seem to arise when celluloid material is brought into digital platforms. I think the kind of role that theoretical work has had in, I am quoting Mulvey again, 'the quality of attention', the quality of further working over the celluloid image on newer platforms which I wanted to primarily focus on as my contribution to the debate of teaching film theory.

Thank You.