



Day Two, Session Two
Roundtable 2

The Slippery Object of Film Studies

Ira Bhaskar
M. Madhava Prasad
Moinak Biswas

Ira Bhaskar

Thank you Moinak [Biswas], Anindya [Sengupta], Madhuja [Mukherjee] and everyone else for giving us the opportunity to actually address and reflect upon issues that concern all of us who are teaching in institutions where Cinema Studies, Film Studies have been formed as a discipline. Lot of work and materials have already been placed, and I'm speaking to all of those. I would like to begin by actually taking off from something that Ashish Rajadhyaksha said just now. I agree with him that we actually have to think of M.A. M.Phil, PhD courses and look at them in their vertical organization of materials, issues, and also orientations of these programmes. In that context, I do want to say that for us at JNU the struggle to set up something like Cinema Studies was really intense. Being a new discipline it was an incredible struggle to convince others that it was a valuable exercise, and we needed a lot of help.

But not just for that reason but also for the reason that working in that discipline after coming to it from other disciplines one is also aware of the disciplinary nature of this activity. And I want to emphasize this a little more, both in terms of its specificity and the way in which Cinema Studies has its

specific kind of identity as a discipline while simultaneously being interdisciplinary in nature. That it was from the very beginning, even in its first phase always already constituted as an object that was different from literature for instance. That identity is very important for us. The fact that it is specific, the fact that it is interdisciplinary, that it shares certain concerns, methodology with other disciplines. Here I do want to talk about the classroom activities. And now I'm speaking about an undergraduate or an M.A. course in terms of core courses. When I think about the discipline itself and the fact that it is new in India and a lot of work has to be done. I think it is really important at one level, at one end of the spectrum to have certain central core courses and no matter what the developments may have been today it's still very important to have a strong sense about what the discipline is all about and to develop skills that enables you in your training to interpret and to produce new works. I do not believe that you can enter from anywhere and produce really creative and radical new work with no basis and no idea. And I'm not just talking about practice but interpretative skills. So I think for me the idea of this discipline is important and for an M.A. it is very important. That's the way we conceptualized our courses, certain core courses. One can debate about what those core courses firstly should be. And also lots of optional courses to develop interest and engage with new materials. These are open courses that allow them to bring a particular interest and develop it.

And in that context the object that we are talking about, and Ranjani [Mazumdar] already talked about, the film object needs to be opened from all the sides and to understand the ways it moves backwards and forwards. But I'm also talking about the relevant interpretative skills and the fact that we have sometimes noticed in the papers that our students write. They do thematic analysis, and those papers read as if they could have been written in any other course. So the issue is to train our students to understand. I'm talking about certain internalization of the materiality of the medium of cinema and its processes and its procedures that would enable them to understand how sound and image are working together. What kind of cognitive and affective registers are being mobilized at that particular moment? And to do film analysis you require a particular skill and a training that is still important. That's the way I perceive it. More interestingly, I think this kind of work in class is immensely pleasurable to students. There is the pleasure of responding to a medium like the cinema. So the pleasure and the meaning and the way we make meaning of that image and sound together as sensuous structure those are the skills we really insist on in our students. This is also training and I'm convinced that

from our students' works this enables them to relate with new materials, very new practices and engage really creatively and very productively in the ways in which they are reading those cinematic forms and experiences. So that's a training which is not wasted, so it's not at all obsolete and extremely crucial.

And I'm not saying this is the only thing we should do, but they are important. The optional courses for M. A. can again vary, can depend on your own interest, also things that you think students would be interested in, things that you think they should have a sense of. And I appreciate what Madhuja [Mukherjee] and Subhjit [Chatterjee] were saying this morning about making those courses self reflexive and actually bringing research materials into class and engaging with those materials. I think some courses like that whether they are reading, writing, research courses or courses where you form a different kind of pedagogy or a different way of mobilizing materials are needed. They are very exciting for the students. And those kinds of courses have gone down very well. They have generated tremendous amount of interest amongst our students.

I would say if someone can teach or is interested in teaching what Ashish was saying in the morning, a course on pre-cinema and how it is leading to the birth of cinema, it would be immensely interesting - if you can teach it differently and bring different kinds of materials. But courses like this actually train students to pose their research questions and help them to develop projects for the future. So for instance those of our M. A. students who apply for M.Phil courses, they come to us and ask what they should write their research proposal on. And our general answer is "think back through your coursework, what are the areas that you were really interested in, was there something you really wanted to push and think back on those issues and develop a project around that?" That has always worked. And for film studies in India there is a tremendous amount of work to be done. We've hardly done anything. We are really at a preliminary stage but we are also excited about the work of our students, the research they are doing, the dissertation they are writing. It is a new work and it's a launching pad for them. And they move into completely new areas. Areas where they are creating and accessing very very different archives, bringing in very unusual materials. The strategy that has worked for us and the students who have come in for M. Phil and PhD from disciplines outside film studies is to immerse them for a year. We don't do separate course work for them but we insist they attend all those M.A. courses. That has completely transformed their projects and their methodologies and the way in which they are asking questions. And hence our conviction that a strong

sense of the discipline is quite important for them. And finally it has turned out that the majority wanted to work on some issues related to Indian cinema. (it does not mean we discourage our students from doing work on international cinema and we are happy to support that interest). And it is absolutely amazing that they are asking those questions and they are going out into the field and suddenly through their work new research areas are opening up about which we may have not thought about before. Maybe our sense of the discipline and the location of discipline and the work that is required are different. I will just end by saying that we are still strongly convinced there is a need for that work to come in, that research to be done, those dissertations to be written and those dissertations to be published and put out in the public domain. We look forward to that kind of initiative. Thank you.

M. Madhava Prasad

The other slippery object that I had in my mind was Indian modernity, for the last 150 years or so we are discussing how India should deal with modernity. Should we embrace it, should we reject it or should we define it in our own way and so on. It's been endless. And in the meanwhile Indian modernity has come and gone. Now Indian modernity is a fact out there in the world. And in it many things have happened, including those debates about what it should be. This is your sum total of Indian modernity. So eluding all attempts to define it, it has simply come to be. There is no getting away from it anymore. And so nowadays when people revive this question it no longer has the same charge in it. So I guess this object of film studies is also a bit like that. Because the discussion about what the object should be is actually what film studies has been about really? Everybody quarrelled about issues like textual criticism, should we go out and talk to audiences, is there really a spectator in the text, or is economics important for understanding cinema and so on- endless series of questions, which have been not just questions but points of disagreement. And then you have whole history of film studies, how you go into that whatever has been done so far. Film Studies include all of those things. You can't get away from the textual criticism, anymore than you can avoid getting into the technicalities of film making in order to have a better understanding of what we are dealing with, nor can you ignore the socio-economic questions. But of course it is a fact of the academy that different institutions give different orientations to these disciplines depending upon the scholars who are located there. Different places do different things. Some places are full of ideology critique and some other places do some other aspects of it. And each one will

be saying this is the important thing. But there is really no question of arriving at some common object and indeed if you look at the history of anthropology it's very interesting to see that after this whole self critical period that anthropology was forced into for a while, today if you ask them what is anthropology they simply say it is what people of Anthropology departments do. This is the effective definition of anthropology. This is no longer governed by seeking an object.

In the humanities it is particularly the case that we, may be out of our habit, may be out of imitation of our social science friends, we keep looking for this object but it is actually about the *subject*, as I was emphasizing yesterday. Our disciplines are about subjects and it's specially the case as we go down to the undergraduate level where film studies is part of liberal education or general education and there you have to produce a curriculum which is suited to that level with that age group of students and so on. As you go up, when you come to research related courses, obviously they have to learn something more specialized, they have to get into the technique, questions of technology and other kinds of knowledges like social science that have a bearing on film etc. If this discipline becomes part of the entire higher education system, then all of it in some way has to be reflected in the nature of the undergraduate programme that you do. So a loop would then be created when the teachers have to include new areas and ideas into play in this education so that a subject can move in that loop. That's what essentially it seems to me is the nature of humanities education is important, Also at that level the question of judgement that is critical textual criticism, which is a practice in which all of this other knowledge that we have about cinema can be deployed in the act of understanding and evaluating a particular film which is again the best thing to be done at the undergraduate level. You have to be able to work with that new knowledge. And of course I suppose the question of text itself. We are finding it difficult to identify the text. But I don't think we should look to identify the text by its own definition. It's our job to identify it. No matter how many pieces it's torn up into. So effectively at the research level it is also a question of practices. Because in a way in India we began to do film studies long after many of these debates had taken place elsewhere. That's also part of our legacy, and we are working with that. So many questions are discussed in different places; one can restart those discussions based on what we are doing here.

From my own experience, I do think that in India one of the big differences is, something which is not only a feature of our academic institutional situation but also a feature of our cinema itself, is that we are still in the extractive

process. There are lots of extractions to be done. That is bringing stuff into the archive or the classroom. There is a lot that we just don't know, that is also one of the reasons why we can't make too much progress with our interpretive, analytical task. So much extraction still needs to be done. So I at least find myself often telling people in my department two things. One is I would be very happy if somebody were to simply write a straight-forward history of Telugu cinema or Kannada cinema or something like that, which requires tremendous amount of work to actually get that out. And what happens is often people work with their dissertation ideas in such a way they want to use a minimal amount of text and then give it some spin and get quickly done with it. But unfortunately that spin they are not very competent at producing. So instead this is a laborious but finally profitable enterprise to do a lot of these histories. And it's not just about one language cinema but different aspects of those language cinemas. On even if somebody is very good at something and could produce theoretically nuanced writing in that case also I say that the dissertation must involve certain amount of extractive work, you must do the necessary documentation for your own project. It is not there. If you say something I can't go and check it. It's available to you in some fashion and it's not available anywhere else. So you have to document it and you have to actually build up and organize your basic stuff so that other works can benefit. So that's it, as far as objects go I think practices rather than search for an object are important. Thank you.

Moinak Biswas

I would like to go back to a couple of points that I made yesterday morning. But of course not repeating them, but making my way through what has been said in between. Practices do not really define the object, even after agreeing with that point, there remains a problem of what we do with the task of not only defining an object but also defining our work in a curriculum in a sense that I was putting it in a cryptic manner yesterday. We also teach a discipline, not only the materials that constitute that discipline. We also teach its paradigms, and one would find it difficult to disagree with Madhava that this is part of film studies, this kind of search, contentious kind of appropriation. One has to put certain questions on the table.

See, the object was slippery all along. It's not that the digital technology or the new economy have subjected the object to a dispersal. We can think about the kind of presentations we had, for instance the presentations of S.V [Srinivas], Ashish and Ranjani, in a way a model of criticism from the very beginning has

taken the object not really in front of you, so that film is not only film, film is not only the experience of cinema in the theatre. Film is also architecture, railways, advertisements, recycling strategies and a whole lot of things. So there is a problem here that is not resolved, which I raised on another occasion in this room itself five/ six years ago in a different context. I'm not saying that one has to sit and mourn the passing of a certain kind of critical paradigm. But a critical attitude strikes a distance with its object. Here what happens is beyond a point not what we produce of this dispersed, scattered thing called cinema, our accounts begin to resemble the films themselves. Because once you have these kinds of contemporary popular forms and mass forms of film commodity they have actually taken on this kind of market aesthetic. This is not in a sense of market-suited aesthetics, but they look like actually some kind of market. They look like proliferation of sensations, objects, commodities, textures, a flux of sorts. It's a curious development, but probably would have happened anyway. And some of the cultural studies criticism sometimes produce accounts that resemble the object of criticism. Where is the criticism then?

Madhava also raised the point of evaluation. He did not say evaluation, he said judgement. How do you actually have the distance from the objects when you are producing a judgement? It's symptomatic that in many cases we have shunned that responsibility. Somewhere we have said that this is not our task or we do not need to do that and so on. See, also the definition of object becomes a point that continues to bother us at another level where you may let go the question what is film. It is suspended provisionally, but then cultural studies (broadly speaking about that orientation) has the problem of defining culture itself. Because everything becomes cultural. Actually you don't make a distinction between what is cultural and what is not. This kind of infinite expansion of the word culture creates another problem. What is a film then in your word? Is it a fulcrum, a peg to hang something on? That can be one set of questions. One has to make a distinction between cultural practices and other kinds of practices, for example, politics and culture. Now of course film studies created its object, because a discipline has to have its object. It was interdisciplinary to begin with. This is not a problem that literature began with or other disciplines, for which interdisciplinarity was a later moment of negotiation. Interdisciplinary does not mean we mix the methods of historiography with the methods of anthropology. But when something like Subaltern Studies came along in the early 1980s they produced a new object. They did not just mix history and anthropology and produce social history of South Asia. They produced new objects also - what account, what phenomena,

what corners of life, what processes in society that had not been thought to be proper objects of historical studies. I don't think this kind of concern disappears, it kind of poses itself anew - how to define the object? And that can also bring other questions. What happens to the film that does not lend itself to this kind of dispersal? There of course comes the whole question of criticism, evaluation. Because I cannot bypass these questions of criticism and I cannot say this is all there is. There are a thousand approaches. You learn everything and then you decide. So there is a kind of film even in Korea which will not lend itself to the popular 'Korean Wave' effects, which is all action cinema, and some of them are extremely violent action films. So there is a whole business of a kind of informal initiative emerging on non university sites, on websites and other kinds of sites - what we sometimes call cinephilia.

So it's not a question of that discourse producing a respectable object first, or let's say a reliable object first, and then we bring it to the class. But we need to build up a conversation with these non-academic cinephiliac initiatives because now the other cinema is also becoming quite strong after a lull. We are experiencing the resurgence of some kind of world 'art cinema'. There is a resurgence of 'art cinema' all over the world from Hungary, Turkey, Thailand, and Romania - everywhere. And you see that they are actually sharing a number of stylistic conventions, for example the way they work with time has become an extremely important thing. It's time and duration. Whether it's Bela Tarr or Apichatpong or others. Now this is an initiative not supported by their local audiences. In Taiwan, for example, there is almost no local audience for these serious films. They are supported by international, trans-national, minority audiences. And there are so many minorities that it's no longer a minority, at least not a negligible number. This is an initiative that has been supported by non-academic cinephiliac discussions, analyses, sharing of information, etc. These people always think in terms of creative initiatives. It is not that everyone will make films but they are potential image makers. If I go into making films, there is a question of principles. And if I go into film making I would not want to repeat just what I received from the market. But I will take some aesthetic position of some kind, in terms of principle, evaluation. It is important there. Therefore I think it is important that we also think of producing such work alongside archival works which is a necessity now. I would simply say that it is a critical attitude. That's the point about making connections with other informal sites of knowledge. If you think its humanistic education and a student, this learner, is already a new material. It was not possible earlier to consider your audience or interlocutor to be a potentially image maker. Once that has

happened, it is very different now. I would say it was always important. But now avoiding that actually makes us more and more distanced from and separated from what is happening on a large scale, which is producing lots of excitement and lots of enthusiasm and giving rise to an international trend in cinema. It is not just a kind of amateur exercise. And the other point which I don't I want to elaborate now as we run out of time. I think Ashish was actually instantiating what we were trying to mean by practice and criticism coming together. That's not a question about incorporating it in the classroom. But let's take Colin's point about the curator as someone who actually selects, asks questions, and not just collects empirical material. Ashish was doing that. This is precisely a kind of work that already brings practice and criticism together. We have been discussing this off and on for the past two days. But we have been only thinking about it in terms of if we can teach film making in institutions. But there are other ways of thinking about that.

Discussion:

M. Madhava Prasad

What you described is true. But I think among these new developments, few people are already split, they on the one hand coming for something else which film studies has to offer in addition to being part of the phenomena. And that distinguishes them from those who were earlier part of this phenomenon. And one has to ask what that desire which lead to this relocation is.

Ranjani Mazumdar

This is directed to Moinak. I mean I share the excitement of what is going on. And for someone like me whenever there is a film I want to go and see the film and talk about the film as film and nothing else. What I think is what is happening around us, why should it be an either/or situation. In a discipline there are many types of responses and many ways to approach, what we want to define as the object of cinema. So the kind of thing that you feel has receded and you would like that to come back can definitely be a part of the discipline. I feel the lament is linked to the fact that there are other ways in which it is being done and that has caused the problem. And I think that is where fundamentally these disagreements are emerging from. Because any discipline has to grow. And the discipline will incorporate some of the issues and the problems that one is facing. So when we are talking about the dispersal, for

instance S V was talking about this, and Ashish has written about Bollywoodization. So when we talk about the dispersal the problem is when evaluated judgement becomes one particular kind of object. And then that acquires certain kind of tag.

Moinak Biswas

No, I did not say these things. Dispersal of the object itself is a fact. It is a process that is taking place and has taken place at many levels. I was trying to suggest we actually constituted the discipline in that manner. If you think of an inter-disciplinary object then from the very beginning it is a slippery object. As I say it is not a question of liking or disliking. The question is where actually a certain kind of criticism only becomes an account of a process without effecting critical distance from it. I also said that it does not need to happen on all occasions. But when you obviate that altogether you don't call it criticism any more, you should call it something else. So I was asking, to put it differently, do we need criticism any longer. And in that case evaluation obviously becomes important. Nobody is saying I'm passing a judgement on a film. I don't think you got it right there.

Sibaji Bandyopadhyay

I was just wondering is evaluation at all avoidable? Can anybody ever avoid evaluating? Are we not as human beings value producing animals? When you use the word evaluation in the field of a discipline you are talking about certain protocols, certain measures, certain rigour - that is about all. To imagine that we can discuss any artefact, any cultural product without evaluating is a simple lie. Impossible.

Moinak Biswas

Well we are talking about the registers or protocols of evaluation. Because if you just assume that it is not your task any longer in let's say an analysis of a popular film, so what you do is you just unpack the story and not even unpack, you just take a part or element of that and say this represents that and so on. Then the whole evaluating process is either to celebrate some kind of popular culture or just take sides along ideologies - whether it's about family values or masculinity, whether diasporic imagination is problematic and so on and so forth. We all began with informal critical or amateur training in the film society circuit. You become attentive to the film form itself to see what is repetitive there or what is productive there and what is really a new departure and

incorporate that into your historical and archival work. And this is not being adequately addressed in our recent work. And it's difficult to go to the classroom without that. That's what I'm saying.

Colin MacCabe

I also think the question of evaluation is very difficult. On the one hand people say we are not evaluating or judging. While you are choosing a text, it's always a choice but on the other side of it when you say my judgement is determining what I'm doing in my teaching. But I think what is important here is the notion of transmission. On all these works what one involves is this notion. Like *Screen* is a child of *Cahiers du Cinema*, and *Cahiers du Cinema* is the child of a kind of film appreciation and that is one of the things we are transmitting now. That's how canon gets revised.

M. Madhava Prasad

One of the major differences of humanities disciplines now is the entry of the popular which is true to literary departments as well as cinema. Here I mean the studies which are about the contemporary, the here and now. This is a very difficult thing about which we did not figure out our position with the rest of it. So it's quite common for such things to be the object of research programme for sometime before they become teachable knowledge. It's still an evolving phenomenon in a scholarly way. So the question is how you treat them as objects.