

Paper

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Aspects of Writing on Cinema

The paper was presented to the Workshop on “Film Criticism” held in December 2019 at the Calicut University, organized by Fipresci-India in collaboration with the Kerala Chalachitra Academy.

At the outset, I would like to thank the organisers of the event for inviting me to participate in this discussion on aspects of writing on Cinema.

I felt all the more humbled when I was told that the event is being held under the banner of Vaikom Mohammed Basheer Chair created in the name of the celebrated Malayalam writer. In my younger days, one of the earliest texts that inspired me to take serious interest in Literature and Cinema was Mr. Basheer’s Novelette “Nannajjinagondaneyittu”, in Kannada translation of his original Malayalam work “My Grandad Had an Elephant”. It was at that time I also learnt that Mr. Basheer’s works were at the confluence of literary language and oral communication, modernity and tradition, conservatism, and liberalism and in the Indian sociological context in the crucial gap between illiteracy and Education. The fact that he was all through his life associated with the medium of Cinema both with its role as a mass communicator and an artistic possibility indicates his keen interest in understanding the cultural transition through that new medium which he pioneered in literature.

Cinema by its nature like Mr. Basheer’s literary oeuvre is at the confluence of modernity in writing and oral cultural traditions, modernity arrived through

innovations in Science and Technology, Cultural histories & theories of Art and logics of Technological interventions. It also foregrounds the conflicts between Commercial choices and intellectual ethics and above all the reality of the physical world and the spiritual needs. A medium condemned to the realism of physical objects in form is redeemed by its capacity of creating psychological spaces which hitherto was the domain of literary and mythical imaginations. But it is vulnerable to societal changes, community behavior and political maneuvers more than any other traditional forms of art and media of e x p r e s s i o n s .

It is therefore necessary for any discourse on writings on Cinema to dwell upon and understand the nature of the medium. What is Cinema is a fundamental question we are still grappling to understand. Though the Western historians, theorists and philosophers have taken up the challenge to respond to the question in terms of the artistic and intellectual possibilities of the medium, the psychological impact on the huge audiences across the globe directly or through other mass media tools and the cultural hegemony the technologically driven visual medias have successfully created over other forms still begs a holistic response to the idea of Cinema. We have needlessly classified it as “Art”, “Cultural”, “Commercial” depending on the location where it is made and seen or not seen.

Geography does not matter for Cinema as far as the form is concerned. It has a global existence but for its cultural and intellectual identity always depends on local content

whatever its form is which is predetermined by the economics of making and skill in technological inputs. It has behind its making, the ideologies and philosophical inputs of both science and Arts. If the assemblage of the material in a frame represents the external world of physical, societal, and cultural details the internal world that is intended to be created is largely dependent on the space, time, and memory in between frames. It is a cliché to repeat that the Cinema is the most powerful and influential visual form driven by technology and commerce of our times. Indeed, in appearance it is a visual form. But unlike the traditional visual forms the impact of cinema on the minds and hearts of the community of people makes it a more psychological form than just being a visual treat or optical illusion. If the traditional arts can work on the minds of the individuals strongly, Cinema and its subsequent variations of technology have altered the community psyche paradigmatically.

It is in this context, we can look at the different aspects of writing on Cinema from the beginning. The earliest responses to film Art comes from European Psychologists like Hugo Munsterberg. Even the other formalists of his time like Sergei Eisenstein, Rudolf Arnheim, Bela Balazs who formulated the earliest film theories who were deeply involved in explaining not only the formal elements like composition of frames etc., but also the technical elements like lighting, camera angles, editing etc., were exploring a methodology in deciphering psychological responses. They were looking at each of those formal elements as a tool of psychological awakening of the audience. The best example is the Eisenstein's theory on editing, Montage, which was one of the earliest method of deconstruction of reality and rearranging it to heighten the dramatic experience through cinema. Indeed, a manipulative mode of construction to affect the emotional quotient of the audience who are in a state of 'suspension of disbelief'. The book on film theory by Hugo Munsterberg published in as early as 1916 was titled "The Photoplay: a Psychological

study" and had been preceded in 1915 by the first theoretical work on Cinema by Vachel Lindsay "The Art of the Moving Picture". Lindsay was responding to the external visual appearance of the medium and he identified three basic types of 'Photoplays' leading to cinema as 'Art', The Photoplay of Action, the intimate Photoplay and the motion picture of splendor. But ironically these three categories have served well throughout the history of cinema to triangulate the cinema of mass entertainment rather than the film Art. Cinema of popular entertainment in the mainstream film business whether in Hollywood or Mumbai or Bengaluru stands firmly on these notions of the nature of the medium. Munsterberg took the idea of external appearance of "Photoplay" and its impact into the interiors of the mind for his writings. Over the years, writings on Cinema has acquired larger dimensions not only on psychological and philosophical frameworks but also through documenting sociological influences, technical innovations, Economic adventures, Political and ethical interventions in Cinema.

On the one hand we have continuous inputs on aesthetics of cinema and its construction methodologies and production protocols and on the other we have emergence of responses to cinema as a mass media through cultural and sociological studies as well which to some extent have moved away from recognizing the artistic possibility of the medium.

Writings on Cinema covers all aspects of Film form, film history, film theory, film aesthetics and film culture studies. The organisers have asked me to approach these aspects of writings through the modes of reactive response, review of experiences of the medium and more specifically the informed and erudite criticism. To these I would like to add the concept of articulate 'Appreciation' as well. Historically, the idea of appreciation was inherent in the evolution of humans as 'Cultured' beings. There were no special classes or tuitions to appreciate 'Art'. It was considered more an 'attitude' than 'activity'. Cultural historian Raymond Williams cited

Art as one of the 'Keyword', one that must be understood in order to comprehend the interrelationships between culture and society.

In a way, Indian cinema has some benchmarks for critical appreciation as it is still being perceived by and large as an extension of theatre, music and dance traditions and technology only as an incidental intervention. Having had a long tradition in understanding of these traditional forms, with 'pleasure principle' as the core value, Cinema is considered as more a mass media for pleasure though sometimes with an ethical responsibility than an artistic possibility for independent individual expression. However there have been some major works in the auteur cinema as well, but the writings on cinema still focuses on elements of cinema like music, dance, theatricality, and literary content than perceiving the total impact of medium or aesthetics. On the contrary, in the west where the medium was a new scientific innovation all the philosophical arguments behind the novelty of the medium also played a big part. In addition, the history of Art also had also converged into the practice of literature by the time cinema was invented. Traditionally ancients in Europe recognized seven activities as Arts: History, Poetry, Comedy, Tragedy, Music, Dance and Astronomy. By thirteenth century History, Poetry, Comedy, Tragedy had all merged into the practice of faculty of literature and philosophy. By 16th century "Art" was clearly synonymous with "Skill". By 17th century activities that were hitherto not considered Art like Painting, Sculpture, Drawing, Architecture – the Fine Arts – incidentally, all "Visuals" were included. The modern concept of Art became all-inclusive from "Visuals" to the Literature and Music to the performing arts like Dance & Dramas. Only Astronomy went into the Domain of Science. At this point, the new medium, Cinema, emerges which literally and experientially encompasses all forms of media and Artistic expressions. All human activities get crystallized into one mode of expression. It is in this context the idea of "Appreciation" emerges to specifically "Read" the

technologically driven visual arts culminating in the articulation of film experience, traditionally sourced with the elements of Lyric, Dramatic and Epic, which were rubric of poetry as recognized by the ancient Greeks & Romans.

The three levels of experiential responses to Cinema are: Gut level responses – the visceral as opposed to intellectual, the emotional/sentimental responses relating to the heartfelt feelings and the intellectual/rational responses relating to the critical evaluation of the mind. The articulation of these experiential modes gets translated into the different aspects of writing. Primarily, the gut level responses or what we normally call "Reaction", "immediate opinion" were hitherto 'oral' in nature. There were private platforms like within the family, friends, and acquaintances. The word of mouth opinion would then decide the popularity of the work

In the 21st century digital world the social media variants have not only replaced these platforms but also have become an aspect of writing replacing the oral tradition. They cater to the reactive mode of public opinion. This aspect of writing has two dominant streams. The recommendatory propaganda tones and the abusive public shaming views. This could be instinctive response or could even be an intentionally planned community activity to promote or deride a cultural act. This could happen in all forms of communication and expression, but cinema is at the centre of this digital aspect of writing along with politics and cricket in India.

The emotional/sentimental response to cinema originating in the feelings of community of people hooked onto Cinema necessitated a particular genre of writing, in the second half of the last century, what is generally known as newspaper reviews. Though it is a demand of the market place, they go beyond the visceral, instinctive, opinionated response but fall short of the criticism as a faculty and lacks intellectual inputs that is required for serious art criticism in terms of both creation and

perception. The review is the aspect of writing which articulates the critical appreciation of the medium. To be a successful reviewer one needs to understand not only the nuances of various modes of expression and their impact on the intended target groups but also the formal elements of film construction. While thinking of the newspaper reviews, I am reminded of celebrated reviewer, Pauline Kael who wrote incessantly week after week for over three decades at the American Newspaper, New Yorker between 1968-91. It was the time Cinema flourished as an art form predominantly in Europe with the likes of Bergman, Fellini, French New Directors, and many others experimenting with cinema as auteurs and also the Hollywood cinema consolidating its hold on the global markets. The punch line for her professional pride was that there are a lot of good things in bad cinemas as well and therefore one need to be on the lookout for the cultural role of the medium which has a huge pan global impact. This witty, biting, highly opinionated and sharply focused film reviewer, and critic, as Wikipedia introduces her, focused on the idea of “Art appreciation” over the academic “Art Criticism”. Cryptic but incisive writings of that period in Newspapers inspired many others and her contemporaries like Roger Ebert who also practiced film writing in the Chicago Sun Times even won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1975 at the age of 33, a rare honour for a film critic mostly known for Newspaper columns. The Newspaper reviews of that era in a way educated the discerning film audiences to respond beyond the instinctive ‘reaction’ or ‘opinion’ and also evidenced that one need not write long treatises on art to be relevant and influential in creating a taste for right artefacts in the cultural domain whether in writing or cinema. However, over the years, the Newspaper review columns have diluted into just highlighting the individual elements of cinema like narrative content, cinematography, music, sounds or editing without getting into the holistic experience of the medium. This is one aspect of writing which is now clearly on decline though the film education in academic forums have been

increasing and there are lot more forums other than Newspapers to publish the writings. This is true of journalistic writings as a whole as there is a greater focus today on increasing the skills of writing or even say film making in the academics rather than critically approaching the subject as a creative opportunity to express oneself. The pedagogic platforms do not provide the domain knowledge anymore whether it is about Cinema or Literature or Economics or politics or business, though a whole lot of information is strewn around and available for sharing. It is the age of information and not the period of search for enlightenment.

In this era of information explosion, the most challenged activity under aspects of writing is Art criticism as an intellectual practice. Whether is in the political, social, and economic treatises or cultural action, Criticism is the victim of demand for conformity. The art objects are patronized by readers/audiences according to their already formed views/opinions. The views of the ‘other’ is shunned as the domain of the collective ‘enemy’. The conformity is to the ‘view of the world’ already formed whereas the constructive criticism is always directed towards discovering one’s own world view. Neo liberalism in arts like in today’s neo capitalist democracy means demand for ‘diversity’ coming from the market and not the texts itself. Prior to the reading or viewing itself the texts are determined by ideological components. The critic is also shackled by the idea of social responsibility determined by the view of the dominant social and political groups than the aesthetic and ethical choices he/she has to e x a m i n e .

It is in this context the film criticism is also striving to survive. Most of the critics have moved to ethically ‘amoral’ positions of film/cultural studies than approaching film as ‘Art’ form. On the one hand there is a tendency to concentrate on sociological/psychological impact of the medium in general, and the other in the area of cultural studies, there is a greater emphasis on the majoritarian acceptance as

the criteria/evidence for serious study of the individual texts. The interest in materialistically successful film and celebrities becomes the career option for many critics for survival. The underlying 'Politics' or intentions are avoided for critical review, but a critical appreciation is used to highlight the syntax of the expression as a cultural evolution in the new form. Ethics or aesthetics are not major critical persuasions as it would lead to raising of deeper intellectual and philosophical

questions. It would also raise inconvenient questions for both the critic and the readers.

In conclusion, the writing on cinema is veering towards reactive and pre-determined appreciation modes than serious critical persuasion for review of the context or academic pursuits. It is a difficult choice for the critic of any Art today. More so if he/she is ethically/intellectually inclined towards an art form which is also a technology driven mass media of commercial valuations.

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