

Article

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Marathi Cinema Meets Italian Neorealism - Beyond A Love Affair: Preliminary Notes on Osmotic Cinema



The increasing emergence of film festivals across the world that are dedicated entirely to non-mainstream Indian cinema are aimed at giving space and transnational authority to independent productions. Across these venues, Tamil, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, Punjabi and Gujarati films to mention a few, shake the traditional filmmaking practices, redefine the history of non-mainstream Indian cinema and facilitates the emergence of unexplored methodological and theoretical connections (Acciari 2018).

The vibrant productions of independent Indian cinema have witnessed a rejuvenation of Tamil cinema with Tarantino-like taste, Malayalam cinema, Bengali cinema, but certainly

Marathi cinema, seems to have gathered much attention by the global panorama of film festivals. Stepping out from the secure perimeter of the festivals that are dedicated to regional productions, Marathi cinema has ventured (and successfully) and gained attention at other large film festivals like Cannes, and last in the list of successes, at the Venice film festival. *The Disciple*, directed by Chaitanya Tamhane, is the latest Marathi film to be accepted at the Venice Film festival and compete for the golden Lion. It was just 6 years ago that the same director Tamhane came to global attention with the film *Court* – a compelling legal drama that intersects the life of an activist accused of inciting song writing - which

won the best film at the section Orizzonti at the Venice film festival in 2014.

Historically, non-mainstream Indian cinema (and by calling it so, I mean those productions that take place at a regional level, away from the Bollywood formula and infrastructure, and those films that involve in some way linguistic competencies other than Hindi) were also films that disseminated and distinguished Indian productions across international film festivals. Bengali cinema has for a long time been historicised, theorised and canonised by the accepted stream of film history, as the quintessential film art form in Indian film culture. Transnational histories have placed the neorealist experiences as core to the development of a Bengali visual language that drastically departed from practices of Indian mainstream visual glossary of narrative excesses and pictorial overindulgences (Gooptu 2011). Bengali cinema we are reminded that “initiated a better standard in Indian films” It originated in a desire for an authentic depiction of Bengali life in films and spawned a whole philosophy of film practice, which in time became the Bengali cinema most important marker” (Gooptu 2011: p29)

This article does not have the ambition to rewrite any history – or at least not yet – but rather to be an annotation and a stimulus to reflect on the regional film histories that can be reinterpreted, rewritten and reframed beyond

the threshold of intellectual ambitions, and the emerging lexicon and pretentious verbiage of recent transnational literature. This article, just like a little interventionist piece, aims to uncover a little more on where we are with transnational cinema now, and how transnationalism, rather than being made speculatively of subterranean and “hidden” links (Ingle 2020), should be viewed as an open and exemplary space in which symbiotic connections shaped up by historic understudied occurrences of events and unplanned encounters can be read. By looking at Marathi cinema as a case study, this brief article, will attempt to bring this art form’s underground connections, over-ground. By addressing cinematic connections between diverse experiences, it gives us the opportunity to not only theorise on novel (and certainly valid) terminologies on transnational experiences that should not be limited by a mere analysis of the text, but also immerse these texts into a more solid contextual and historical frame.

Some questions are missing in the current writing that sees the evolution of Marathi cinema in relation to other international experiences. If Marathi cinema is placed in dialogue with Iranian cinema, then how are these cinematic experiences relatable? Are these encounters just circumstantial or do they have much deeper and significant historical roots?

Were Iranian films circulated within Maha-

rashtra? How and when? And are there testi-
 monies of such films affecting the sensitivities
 and creative spheres of audiences and artists
 in the area? In this article, while trying to look
 at pockets of missing historical inquiry, which
 are often neglected and relegated to be mar-
 ginal, I'll attempt to push the boundaries on
 how transnationalism is indeed an open and
 reciprocal process. Transnationalism should
 be studied as being 'exchangeable' and made
 of intellectual nuances. In this light, I'll at-
 tempt to sketch a theoretical approach to dis-
 cuss cinematic 'exchangeability', which I will
 call "osmotic cinema". To begin considering
 what I call osmotic cinema, I seek to reflect on
 what history tells us of what is understudied,
 and as a micro-case study, I will use an exam-
 ple from a recent Marathi production in dia-
 logue with Italian Neorealism to open further
 the parameters of transnational connections.
 Marathi cinema and Neorealism should then
 be seen as connected and be treated as open
 and plural categories, seeking to identify spe-
 cific continuities between these two cinematic
 moments. Such continuities are here consid-
 ered as osmotic passages, wherein contexts,
 filmic texts and the centrality of some themes
 appear to be core. In doing so, I hope to add
 another layer to the importance of historicising
 beyond the mere obvious and, reflect on the
 responsibility we have as scholars and histori-
 ans, to look at those 'cracks in the wall of Indi-

an film history', and fill it with overlooked ac-
 counts. I wish to make a small intervention on
 what appears to be missing methodologically
 in the most recent scholarship, and further the
 scholarly ambition for an informed project on
 the histories of transnational Marathi cinema.
 In doing so, I would like to suggest to reflect
 upon "born and unborn" international connec-
 tions in order to place Marathi cinema at the
 forefront of a possible revisionist Indian film
 history.

Looking at the missing loops gives us the op-
 portunity to fully justify the intervention of
 theoretical interpretation and provide a solid
 context. Marathi cinema, could and should be
 looked beyond the duality of art cinema vs.
 mainstream cinema, or national cinema vs re-
 gional cinema. It is worth moving the focus
 on cultural events and look at film circulations
 in India, particularly during the years imme-
 diately after partition, not only as a contextual
 parameter, but also as a methodological tool
 to explore how curation of international cine-
 ma affected the regional productions.

Accounts on the connections between Iranian
 cinema and New Marathi cinema have solidly
 established an aura of authorship to some of
 these recent productions (Wani 2013). Wani
 reminds us that since *Shwaas* (2004), Marathi
 cinema which was historically at the forefront
 of India's prolific productions, experienced a

new creative wave. I would not hesitate to call

these series of films New Wave Marathi cinema, and similar to Wani, I tend to agree on the multitude of strands such as thematic, material, cultural and social that New Wave Marathi cinema is currently unravelling. While Wani presents a more articulated and less speculative connection of Marathi cinema with Iranian Cinema (Wani 2013), more ambitious accounts have framed this same connection (Ingle 2020) by neglecting the complex historical milieus of Iranian film history pre and post revolution. Marathi cinema and subterranean links to Iranian cinema (Ingle 2020), appears to be an attempt to pretentiously build a theoretically accepted framework, but it fails to acknowledge the history, and with it, the Iranian creative effort for international visibility that the works of exiled filmmakers have brought to the surface. While such connections are certainly appealing, the ambition here seems to be a mere intellectualization that seeks to justify Marathi cinema within the realm of Indian art film form. On the contrary, rather than forcing 'cracked' aspirational theoretical views, the need to revisit the approach to the study of regional cinema not only through the distinction of categories (art vs mainstream), but also, and especially, in relation to other forms of cultural circulation of films across India, seems more cogent. By placing Marathi cinema in dialogue with Italian Neorealism, gives us the opportunity to

look at the importance that film festivals and film societies played in the refinement of a visual glossary for a distinct 'realistic' language (approaches that have precast a certain level of filmmaking weaved with vernacular and ultra-rural visions) more closely. By keeping Marathi cinema and Neorealism as open categories, provides us with the opportunity to explore the diffusion of human connections through demarcated strands of desire and loss, and innocence and acceptability that can be uncannily found in *Fandry* and *The Bicycle Thieves*.

A revisionist methodological approach allows for a more inclusive appreciation of the filmic connotations and traits that journey across diverse film cultures. However, as it will be seen further on, Marathi cinema enables unspoken connections that inform over-ground transnational consciousness, and allows diffusion and harmonisation of thematic and aesthetics forms with Neorealism. To further acknowledge these connections, I'll engage with the notion of osmosis and its scientific principle as a wide metaphor to talk about diffusion rather than appropriation, and expand the lexicon of transnational filmic connections.

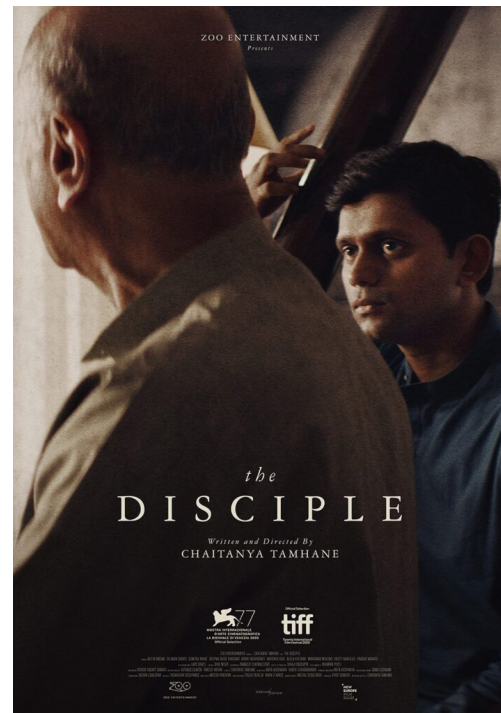
Notes on osmotic cinema

Scientifically, osmosis is a biophysical phenomenon in which a solvent move across a selectively permeable membrane and occupies another body. Let's imagine we have a bowl of

coloured water and a sponge is dropped into it. At the beginning, the concentration of coloured water outside the sponge is high, while inside is absent. With the passing of time, with the outer membrane acting as porous barrier the coloured solution gradually diffuses into the sponge resulting in a concentration colour gradient within the sponge. As sufficient time is allowed, then the concentration equilibrates within, and outside the sponge resulting in the process of osmosis.

The coloured water in the metaphor is the Neorealism, which is a largely known Italian film culture that emerged as a reaction to WWII. Neorealism affected Bengali cinema, and the contact between Rossellini and Ray and their cultural exchange is now well documented. Bengali cinema, affected by Neorealism, embraced the use of 'realistic' and non-studio based settings, untrained actors and a propensity to natural mundane settings. The permeable barrier is the cultural arena of India in which neorealistic nuances started permeating. Along with Bengali cinema, another fervent film cultural sphere in India was in the state of Maharashtra, where on one side, there were the mainstream productions of the studios, and on the other, there were those films that were celebrating a certain regional pride. It is important to look at the 1950s as a crucial moment to see the presence of two main trends: the productions that supported the na-

tional ambition of a resurgence post-partition



through established infrastructure, and on the other, the release of regional productions that were (possibly) interested in preserving a certain degree of localism and vernacularism.

Ravi Vasudevan writes with regard to the Hindi cinema and its significance in the 1950s and 1960s, that such cinema was rejected by the Bengali tradition of authors such as Ray, which was oppositional with the popularity of Hindi cinema among the audiences. Vasudevan reminds in his work that both literary and thematic drives were at the core of rehabilitating Indian cinema within the frame of realistic practices (Vasudevan 2000). In Marathi cinema, the ambition to intellectualize the local, and the expressive and narrative forms was driven by an inclination towards realism that the neorealist experience offered at a moment of crucial cultural transformation. An

overview on what is being defined as “New Marathi Cinema” (Wani 2013) brings to the surface, much like the neorealist experience, affective qualities and sharable everyday experiences to which its audience could relate to. Marathi cinema, besides borrowing from existing vernacular forms of arts such as literature, tapped into existing international experiences where stories of the mundane and the quotidian abound. In doing so, such productions had the ambition to develop a cinematographic language that could sustain and nourish regional productions with a twist. Yet, while on one side those productions have celebrated local art forms, on the other, they have not dismissed the intervention of international cinema in recounting local concerns. Marathi cinema began gradually absorbing, osmotically, (since the 1950s) – albeit subterraneously (?) – the lesson of Neorealism that is not forgotten, which the recent productions have revitalised and brought back over-ground.

Similar to neorealist cinema, by contesting and criticising social conditions, human humiliations across diverse classes and often narrated through the eyes of children, Marathi cinema diffuses different and yet similar human conditions. Such osmotic diffusion unravels and criticises caste/class segregation, “forbidden” love, desire to change and yet the impossibility to do so – themes that are ever closer to the core of Neorealism and its mun-

dane processes of sense making. Significant Marathi productions took place during the years immediately after partition and the 50s; years during which, the first international film festival also took place across multiple cities in the country beginning from the New Empire Cinema in Mumbai. The first International Film Festival of India (IFFI), programmed films such as: *The Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan*, *Rome Open city*, and *The River*; and poignantly, the Indian entries included along with Raj Kapoor’s *Awara*, the Marathi film recounting a true story of a peasant, *Amar Bhoopali*, which, despite being imbued in a certain theatricality and stylistic technicalities, tapped into the mundane, the relatable and into a certain “veracity” of the everyday.

By exploring the accounts of these cultural arenas, and by looking at early curatorship strategies, allows us to place and understand those local productions in dialogue with other international film waves, and attempt a historicised appreciation of transnational – exposed – connections. It is necessary to look at creative historical intersections to further the comprehension, beyond notionistic theories, of the sensitivities of local filmmaking and their creative and expressive practices when exposed to international events. While certainly the Marathi new wave goes in tandem with the exponential growth of multiplexes in cities and towns (Wani 2013), the climax

of the evolution of a cinematic language and the persistence of a lucid creative trend is to be found in impactful global film cultures that have diffused – osmotically – their dictates. The common understanding that Iranian cinema affected and continues to affect Marathi film productions, while being critical among cinephiles and film-makers, it is also problematic as it legitimises the omission of the circulation of other international film cultural histories in India and their influence on local productions. New Marathi cinema, like Neorealism, has found an after-life in new generation of filmmakers. This is true for several Marathi films that continue to engage with neorealist themes, narrative practices and stylistic experimentations, while also and simultaneously aspiring for their own place in the global network of exhibitions and distributions, thereby regulating film consumption nowadays.

The metaphor of “a love affair” contained in the title of this essay provokes and suggests a fugitive and an unattainable permanent connection between Marathi cinema and Neorealism; the insistent intellectualization of Marathi cinema vis-a-vis Iranian cinema places the Indian-Italian liaison at risk. However, when explored within the history of global film circulation in India, Marathi cinema appears to be curated within film events alongside Neorealism, suggesting a meaningful and

transformative connection that seems to continue to encourage changes in its new wave.

By looking at films such as *Tingya* and the struggles of its young protagonists in preventing the family bull from being killed, and *Fandry*, in which the young boy keeps the dream of an impossible love at the forefront of caste prejudices, it is astonishing to slip and cast-off the terms of desire and innocence, and pain and burden of the young Mario in *The Bicycle Thieves*. At the end of the film, Mario recognises his father running with the stolen bicycle across a dilapidated Rome post-war, and calls for him in a heart-wrenching scream, which is unbiased, sentimental and unjudgmental. The arrival of Mario, from the crowd of men who have captured the culpable father, is the climax that enables the freedom of ‘Ricci’ on a destitute local accountability, where ‘castes’, ‘class’ and imposed societal norms still are ‘the norm’. The authenticity of the location, use of non-professional cast, and the use of a child and the overall child-like way of enabling innocence and disabling ‘Ricci’s desire’, meets the mechanisms of desire and innocence to be found in *Fandry*. The young protagonist – Jabya – on the backdrop of caste discrimination and segregation, and disillusioned by the predicament of his family, begins to show interest in school. He is fascinated by the young Chankya, who however, despite liking him as a friend, does not

love him. In his untainted desire to win Chankya's love, Jabya understands the true nature of society, and his innocence is transformed into delusion, and while he protests about the constrictions of societal norms in ravaging anger, he is – sadly – still entrapped within it.

The disconnections that I find with Iranian cinema in relation to new Marathi cinema, is the lack of engagement with political themes, nostalgia and resistance that most of the post-revolution Iranian cinema had. Rather, the diffusion of Neorealist facets appears more cogent in new Marathi cinema, and the protagonists are embedded into a defeatist reality, into an everyday happening to which the protagonists are habituated, and in which, only the eyes of youth is unrestricted in its potential. Thus, children in both traditions negotiate the “unobtainable” of the adult world. Both films, *Fandry* and *The Bicycle Thieves*, successfully focus on and work around the terrain of immiseration, hardships of society and human emotions devoid of the kind of Iranian resistance, but acts as a commentary on the societal, cultural and human destitution.

Much like Italian Neorealism, Marathi cinema indulges in narratives around disparity, and, rural and local suffering to engage with the everyday order, to produce an archive of contemporary preoccupations. This approach with neorealist articulation of the ordinary, enunciates the diffusion of a range of histories

that flow through cultural networks exposed through film societies and film festivals.

While developing local narratives that address social concerns (caste system for instance), the new Marathi wave, taps into global filmic languages, building rural and semi-urban unapologetic depictions of a decadent political system, orthodox beliefs, abusive and constrictive traditions, and feudal family dynamics through transnational narrative strategies. What do the mentioned Marathi and Italian neorealist films have in common? The highlight on adult unobtainability. Jabya, much like Mario, being the innocent chance for a change, marks also the inexorability of local societal dictates; the protagonists, being full of potential, end up succumbing to obsolete societal norms and submit to their cultural conditioning. Hence, Marathi cinema, while attempting to criticise some of the traditional values, comes across as being aspirational in the artistic global feel they try to develop, but also overambitious. Several of these films try to mix the local aspiration to reform and modernize (in both film-making aspects and the content) with a realism that echoes the Italian tradition and reinforces aesthetics of desire, weaving loss and decadence with the presumed illusion of the unobtainable.

Marathi cinema provides a visual-lexicon that becomes an archive of an ambitious changing India, with themes that give-in to societal

norms, challenging those stigmatizations only partially. The Marathi films mentioned in this article have increasingly absorbed from the wide history of world film making practices and languages and use it almost as an archival evidence, to rationalise a transnational interest. Instead, the irresoluteness of some of the characters remain unchanging and merely 'angry'; these characters in new Marathi films are challenged and fearful, but also tentative and unprepared for the unpredictability of life, and yield to unfulfilled desires and rural norms.

Conclusion

The stories that narrate the ordinary lives in Maharashtrian villages certainly shake the conventions of those film histories in India that have predilected the association of Italian Neorealism with Bengali cinema. I did not seek to promote any forced links with other international world-known film cultures, but rather, by looking at "the obvious" missing historical links, a pattern seems to emerge. By looking at Marathi cinema hand-in-hand with Neorealism, gave the chance to begin a reflection on how the methodologies commonly used to write about Indian film history could be expanded.

Independent productions in Indian cinema have begun to populate the cinema scenes significantly within the country – with all the hiccups of biased censoring scissors –

and abroad, resulting in a forceful shake-up of those norms and propelling art cinema to the forefront. Indian film history has accounted for an independent movement within the film art scene headed by Bengali productions, wherein the work of Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Ray have dominated the field. And rightly so! *The Apu Trilogy* still gives me tears and takes me completely away from the glamour and shining jewellery of luxurious Bollywood productions, recreating and re-interpreting a new glossary for "viewing" India. Arranged marriages, family diatribes, hidden loves and even lust is depicted with unprejudiced views and poetic perspectives.

Thus, Bengali filmmaking has forged a novel way of thinking cinema, which conferred to these productions an international appeal across the parterre of well-established festivals, giving a global identity to Indian cinema. But, if we are ought to rethink film history in India to begin a more critical appraisal of what has travelled abroad, and of what is currently travelling abroad, particularly to film festivals, historians seem to have missed the intervention of Marathi cinema at a global level since 1936 when *Sant Tukaram* received the "special recommendation" award at the 5th Venice Film festival.

This article aimed to push the boundaries a little, of what the well-known history of Indian cinema has documented on Indian art cinema,

or what is accepted as such, and shift the focus to redefine the terms of national aspiration into a transnational context as presented by Marathi cinema. Independent Indian cinema (by independent, I mean films that are produced away from the glamour and infrastructure of Bollywood films), while having met the obstacles of national viewers, and overall of the attitude of a nation that was emerging from colonialism in search of a renovated identity, has in good and in bad, always exercised and approached some kind of social aspiration.

First and foremost, this article intended to be a contribution to the debate about the production of historical transnational consciousness and subjectivities. It focuses on the human emotions, on the everyday and on the mundane processes of sense making, rather than on ideology-led pathways of interpretation and state-led or scholarly-elite initiatives. I contend that watching *Fandry* vis-a-vis *The Bicycle Thieves*, gives the opportunity to expand our methodological and theoretical understanding of what is transnationalism, and move towards an idea of independent Indian cinema as an osmotic process. Watching the two films in parallel is a social practice as it prompts real-life enquiries and fuels collective interrogations about the significance of class, castes, adherence to cultural and traditional norms, along with the significance of an

apparent rebellion, its subsistence and meaning. Both films propel the construction and the ambition of a sense of freedom and ‘unfulfilled’ desire. *Fandry* highlights a process of historical and social sense-making that is at the same time a process of archive-making. It implies, in other words, that the archive is constituted by the collective – yet ordinary – usage of the diffusion of various neorealistic sensitivities.

On a second note, this article also seeks to be my initiation to the study and writing of Marathi cinema; by including contextual experiences along with textual analysis for a deeper understanding of the nuances of the *nouvelle* Marathi cinema, gives us the opportunity to go beyond prescriptive views around transnational ambitions.

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Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank my colleagues at The English and Foreign Language University for their invaluable discussions on the area of independent Indian cinema, and particularly, Professor Madhava Prasad for his intellectu-

al stimuli. I also would like to thank my creative partners at the UK Asian Film Festival for continuous conversations on emerging regional Indian cinema. A special thanks goes to Prof. Justin Smith at De Montfort University, an invaluable colleague who marvellously copes with all my intellectual deliriums.

I would like to dedicate this nascent reflection on Marathi cinema to those who wish to move past the "unobtainable". Last but not least, I dedicate this work especially to *Mousier Crouton* and his kids.

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