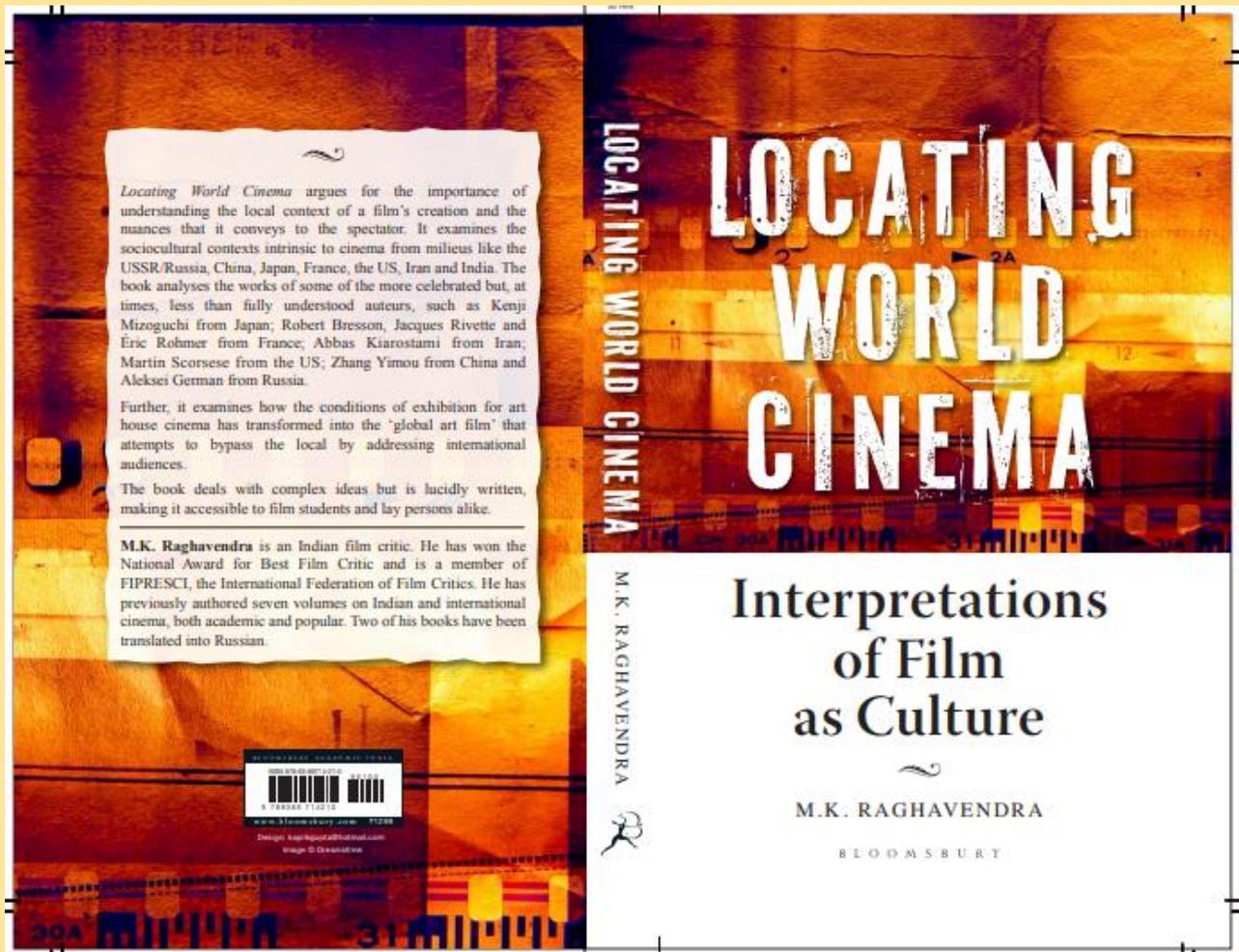


## Excerpts

M. K. Raghavendra

### **Locating World Cinema: Interpretations of Film as Culture**

*Published by Bloomsbury in 2020*



#### From 'Introduction: Between Meaning and Significance'

Evaluation and judging a film as art/ expression cannot but ride on the interpretation one gives to it but every kind of interpretation cannot support judgment. David Bordwell proposes that when spectators construct meaning out of a narrative film it can be one of only four possible types. They would begin by

constructing a concrete world and an ongoing story and they would then go about attributing a 'point' or abstract/ conceptual meaning to it, assuming that the film is directing the spectator in how it is to be read. The spectator could also assume that the film is speaking indirectly and she/ he may construct covert or implicit meanings

sometimes – either as part of the exercise reconciling anomalous elements within the filmic text or by invoking the symbolic impulse. The implicit/symbolic/ covert meaning could be compared with the most apparent meaning (the ‘referential’ meaning) with which it might either be in consonance or disagreement. Attributing irony to the filmmaker might be a way of dealing with any detected dissonance. Very often the covert meaning is the one which furthers appreciation of a film. The three kinds of meaning described above all point to the film ‘knowing’ what it is doing but the film may also yield a repressed or symptomatic meaning that it divulges involuntarily, which could point to some latent prejudice or fear on the filmmaker’s part and might even contradict the film’s rhetoric. Regarded as individual expression, the symptomatic meaning owes to the artist’s obsessions but if seen as part of a social dynamic, it can be traced to economic, social or ideological processes. To use analogy, the first two kinds of meaning together (i.e. ‘explicit meaning’) correspond to speech and the third (implicit meaning) corresponds to body language/ gesture which registers nuances that speech itself is unable to express. The symptomatic meaning, regarded thus, corresponds to a stammer or a nervous tic that a person might try to suppress, but which nonetheless appears and is read. An inability to control habits of speech could also yield symptomatic meanings although speech itself can be regarded as the originator or source of explicit meaning.

Much (though not all) of the interpretation in this book pays close attention to the context of articulation i.e.: the location of the discourse. Serious filmmakers are not always aware that their

concerns are ‘local’ and the ‘local’ is something they might even wish to transcend. But there are two different implications of the ‘local’ which come into play here. The first is the socio-political context invoked by the narrative and the second is the context called into question when a film is being interpreted – given the location of its discourse. It is evident that the two ‘locals’ are not identical; an animal fable, for instance, does not specify a context but animal fables from different cultures bear characteristics that are dissimilar. The first ‘local’ sometimes does not need elaboration as in films from/about spaces which have gone through historical processes widely registered – like Germany, Russia and the socialist world in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that a worldwide audience would know about. It is reasonable to assume that the name ‘Hitler’ need not be explained to film audiences. For countries where the local context will be unfamiliar to outsider-audiences, film-makers use other strategies to contextualize issues. The Iranian Asghar Farhadi (*A Separation*, 2011), for instance, initially withholds information with regard to the ‘first local’ and then springs it upon the audience to resolve the mystery deliberately created.

### **From Chapter 1: ‘The Engineered Look: The Film Festival Circuit and the Aesthetics of the Global Art Film’**

#### **On The film festival circuit**

The third phase in the development of film festivals commenced in the 1980s when their spread saw the film festival phenomenon becoming institutionalized and professionalized and not understandable as it had earlier been. The film festival phenomenon entered this

historical phase when festivals began to spread and a film festival is underway every day somewhere in the world, estimated numbers varying from 1200 to 1900 festivals each year. There are major international film festivals, regional film festivals, local film festivals, festivals dedicated to documentaries, animation and education as well as film weeks, and film specials. The mushrooming of film festivals worldwide led to the establishment of the international film festival circuit. The following are some characteristics observed with regard to the film festival circuit:

- a) There is fierce competition, distinction and emulation on this circuit and festivals cannot operate outside of it. The programs, the development and organization of each festival influence the position and versatility of the rest of the festivals.
- b) The interrelational dependency of festivals means that festivals are embedded within the global system of the film festival circuit. Their embedding is visible in many written and unwritten rules, such as the circuit's giving great importance to the showcasing of world premières.
- c) Since film festivals both emulate and counter Hollywood, commercial cinema is not taboo at film festivals and many commercial films opt for their premieres there. Art cinema is therefore like a different product meant for a different segment but at the same market place.
- d) The competition for prizes has become one of the main focuses of press festival coverage, and festivals without prizes are less frequently visited and reported upon by journalists.
- e) The historical festivals have lost their exclusivity which may be interpreted as Europe losing its cultural hegemony in the global order. But this development also does not mean that every nation will have an equal opportunity on the circuit. The hierarchy of festivals remains intact.
- f) When, in the early 1970s, the selection procedures of the major European festivals were opened up, this was not only followed by an emphasis on individual artistic achievements, but also by a passionate interest in unfamiliar cinematic cultures. But sincere support for politically marginalized cultures has increasingly given way to a neo-colonial attitude: there being few new cultures to discover, festival audiences are looking for intimate (anthropological) encounters with unfamiliar cultures.
- g) The 'national' has returned in a new avatar. The cream of the national cinemas is presented at the top Western film festivals while festivals in the 'Third World' – e.g. Havana, Ouagadougou and Carthage – find it difficult to draw the best films even from their own regions. Indigenous film festivals remain subordinate within the circuit even as their 'national cinemas' prosper.
- h) The 'national' is not associated with the 'nation' as it once was. It is more of a free-floating signifier used in film festival discourse to market new cinemas.
- i) This situation in which the 'national' is dissociated from the 'nation' also has its advantages, however. For example, when national film boards censor a controversial film, the international film festival circuit may offer opportunities for global exposure sidestepping the authority of the nation-state.
- j) As local differences are erased through globalization festivals, need to replicate each other. But, paradoxically, the notion of novelty is brought in to emphasize difference in another way.
- k) Festivals attract people by offering them new experiences in cinema. At present the public finds its way to festivals to see, for

instance, the latest movie of a Japanese cult director, a program specialized in Sub-Saharan cinema, animation or, short films. The bottom line is that attending festivals has become an established cultural practice for a large public.

- l) While festivals give audiences a chance to see the smaller budget and niche films that are not made available to them in the commercial context, the success of the festival network has made it very difficult for many producers and filmmakers to find creative ways of becoming financially independent.
- m) Successful movements such as Iranian cinema and Dogme prove that different types of films can be sold globally, provided that there is a shared sense of coherence and outstanding value between films, i.e. a brand name in marketing terms. In art/world cinema 'brands' are predominantly formed of movements (stylistic and/or national) or authors. Sales representatives and companies recognize that film festivals are the places in which such 'brands' are made.
- n) When a small place like Cannes gains so much importance entirely for its festival, property prices shoot up as does the cost of living. It is therefore unviable for locals to live there and practice other professions not connected to the festival. Consequently, there is no local audience for the films shown and everyone in the audience is in the position of an international tourist. Phrased differently, those who attend the film festival are the true citizens of Cannes if only for a week or two every year.

While many of these characteristics pertain to the politics of the film festival circuit it is also to be expected that some of them will influence the course of art cinema. As instances, there will evidently

be films made which will appeal directly to festival audiences without passing through a local cultural filter in the home space. The 'look' of many films, it may be anticipated, will gain importance over the local (political/cultural) purposes that the films serve. A 'look' could also be engineered to simulate the 'artistic' in cinema, signal that the film is 'art'. Film-makers from far-flung corners of the world may be tempted by the demand for ethnicity to 'report' on their own cultures to festival audiences, who are constituted differently from the way art film audiences once happened to be. The proliferation of film festivals keeps a class of festival-hopping film professionals busy throughout the year and this 'public' will have a large say in the impact of any global art film. If a comparison can be made with the older cinema, where the avant-garde addressed an informed and cosmopolitan cultural elite, global art cinema addresses film professionals like journalists and critics who are prone to judging cinema largely in terms of film trends – which they are more familiar with than the high culture that art cinema demanded some acquaintance with.

**From Chapter 4: 'Unattainable Women: Sexual Anxiety and Location: Scorsese, Rohmer and Kiarostami'**

**On Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976):**

*Taxi Driver* begins with Travis Bickle driving around New York at night, his eyes darting this way and that, at the people on the streets. The first part of *Taxi Driver*, the part that interests me more, deals with Travis, (Robert De Niro) obsessed with the sordidness of the city, spotting Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), who is a campaign worker for Senator Charles

Palantine, a candidate for President of the United States. Betsy, Travis is certain, does not belong in the filth that is New York; she is the one person with whom he might connect, but she has an admirer Tom, a colleague who has declared his love for her, usually in attendance.

Since this is the first film being discussed I will begin in a very basic way by discussing the filming of the interpersonal exchanges. There are different kinds of exchanges in *Taxi Driver* and in the first kind, Travis deals with the person at the taxi office or with the other taxi drivers like Wizard (Peter Boyle) who are engaged in small talk. In these exchanges, lines of dialogue spoken by Travis are usually cut to the listener-other (the standard shot-reaction-shot format) and there is a back-and forth which is set up. While we are privy to Travis listening to the other person, there is never a situation when Travis is talking and the camera focused on the listener. Travis' countenance when he is listening registers what he is hearing and Travis acquires an 'interiority' that is not granted to the other person(s). This means that while Travis is individuated, the others are merely denoted as 'friends', 'taxi drivers', 'the girl at the counter' or 'the man at the office'. They are not 'interpersonal exchanges' between persons but Travis transacting with an impersonal world. Since it is quite a while before Travis interacts with a 'person' viz. Betsy, he emerges as separate from a world full of faceless people and this is given emphasis by the voice-over when he speaks to us. The dominance of night sequences reduces humanity to the level of fleeting shapes silhouetted against the neon. When close-ups of Travis are constantly cut to these moving shapes, we expect that whatever action occurs in *Taxi Driver* will originate in Travis' person, action not

derived from the relationships - still to be defined - but initiated by his psychology. When film theorists describe American film narrative as driven by 'psychological causation' as an operating principle, they imply causation only by those endowed with psychology because all characters are not thus conceived.

The other kind of verbal exchange in *Taxi Driver* occurs between Travis and Betsy – and later between him and Iris – when there are actually two 'persons' involved. Betsy is introduced to us through a voice over. Travis announces her even before she is seen by the camera. When she is introduced, we also see something independently for the first time – without Travis being the mediator. Betsy is in her office interacting with Tom and, when she sees Travis staring at her, Tom is dispatched to send him away. The camera quickly shifts to Travis now and his viewpoint is resumed. Betsy, despite being a 'person', is not allowed the same interiority that Travis has been given. She, in essence, remains defined in terms of what she means to Travis, and causation, evidently, cannot proceed from her.

*Taxi Driver* is constructed around Travis Bickle or, rather, the individuality that Robert De Niro is seen to possess. Where early cinema depended on the type (the vamp, the family man, the villain), there was, as cinema developed, a move towards more complex types and even ironic reversals of type. This means that films have tried to create individuals, or rather, 'individualities' as types. The factor bestowing a type with 'individuality' is his/her striking separateness from other people - his/her ability to make us believe that he/she is as 'we' are behind our

disguises, someone capable of 'defeating our self-defeats'. What this means is that there is identification with the star-as-protagonist because he/she represents us as we might have been, if we had had the strength to be what we actually are. We therefore project ourselves into the 'individuality as type', something we do not do with 'character-types'.

Hollywood films usually rely profoundly on the 'individuality' but there cannot be room for more than one or two of these in any film. Films therefore also include character-types, without which the 'individuality' loses significance. It is perhaps only because of the presence of people indistinguishable from their social roles that the 'individuality' retains its appeal. In *Spider-Man* (2001), for instance, Peter Parker/Tobey Macguire is the 'individuality', while his uncle and aunt are character-types. The 'individuality' is valued because he/she stands out above his/her given social role to which the character-type submits.

Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* is the 'individuality' but Betsy is not describable in that way. Betsy is different only because she is physically set apart from other women by her appearance, and the camera dwells on this. There is another convention here, which is the dominance of heterosexual monogamy as an operating principle. This convention implies that the audience will only accept Travis being paired with Betsy and not Tom to whom she will be unattainable. Travis, a taxi driver, making such a confident move to woo someone above his class originates in the conventions of cinema rather than in any social expectations that the audience might ascribe to him. As the only 'individuality'

in the film, he is projected by the audience to win her, just as his rival Tom (Albert Brooks) is not. Betsy's brief reappearance at the end is perhaps only to reassurance that no pairing has taken place between her and Tom despite her break-up with Travis.

Since my interest in *Taxi Driver* is principally in Travis' 'futile wooing of Betsy', how is their relationship represented? The film is endowing Betsy with no more than surface and she is what she seems at first glance. That is why *Taxi Driver* hits on the rudimentary episode of the porn film to induce Betsy to reject him. If she had a psychology of some sort the break-up might have had more complex implications, but here it is left to Travis to initiate it through his thoughtlessness. Also, there being more than an indication that Travis is revolted by the sex industry, is it likely that he would be a porn film addict? The porn film is perhaps only to create grounds for his break-up with Betsy, which must be from his side.

I have hitherto presented Travis' wooing of Betsy and his rejection by her as being rooted in *his* psychology – because Betsy is only barely a 'person'. This being the case, is their relationship even a 'relationship' as we understand the term? Even in the submission of the weak to the strong, it is naive to attribute the submission only to the psychology of the strong. My argument is that the film is only interested in charting Travis' emotional trajectory and that Betsy is no more than an appropriate stimulus. Her presence is required only to provide Travis with a fleeting beacon before he lapses into an incurable condition. Another kind of beacon might have been just as effective – although perhaps not as decorative.

The most effective segment in the film, in my view, contains the moment when Travis has become 'political' and tells Senator Palatine that the whole city should be 'flushed down the toilet'. Optimism and expectations are emotions that politicians live on but Travis is beyond that - although, briefly, he is still connected enough to communicate this to a listener. Travis is incapable of articulating his unease as a social problem with a solution. His own body is, rather, a metaphor for the city and cleansing it is the first step towards cleansing the city.

*Taxi Driver* is about 'alienation' and Travis is apparently 'pathological' but there is a difficulty with De Niro playing him. De Niro is a charismatic actor; but what is 'charisma' really? It can be argued that 'charisma' implies an audience at whom it is directed. The issue here is how someone could be pathologically alienated and still be charismatic: because 'alienation' implies being cut off from social interactions. If one recollects Mersault from Camus' *The Outsider*, he is presented as quite colorless. But colorlessness in the 'individuality' would also inhibit projection into her/him by the audience.

Whereas the pathological subject should be an unreliable narrator, what we see corresponds to what the Travis has been telling us. The film is depending on point-of-view but it is not merely restricting our field of knowledge to Travis' viewpoint; moral justification for the action is also provided by Travis and he remains 'moral'. Just consider where Travis' 'pathological condition' takes him eventually: to shooting an armed robber, killing a pimp trafficking in minors as well as a dreaded gangster,

rescuing a twelve-year-old prostitute and becoming a public hero. Given that Travis is the 'individuality' in whom audiences have invested their emotions, it might have been extremely inconvenient to have him being senselessly destructive or even mistaken in his actions.

The cultural significance of Travis Bickle and *Taxi Driver* will be looked at separately but Scorsese's film valorizes the motivated individual, the person who cannot go wrong even when he/she is as pathological as Travis is. But the stranger aspect of the film is that the unattainable woman is only made unattainable *by him*; she has no voice in her own 'unattainability'. The fact that all action in the film originates in its only 'individual' ensures this. Theorists have noted how, in American cinema, we recall the individuality represented by the star but rarely the role. In *Taxi Driver* 'Travis Bickle' is a name made ordinary and given to the role, as a token gesture towards the colorlessness appropriate to the outsider; there is an evident mismatch between it and 'Robert De Niro'.

#### From Chapter 5: 'Beyond Religion: The Spiritual Cinema of Robert Bresson'

##### Religion and artistic value

Bresson is not an easy filmmaker to write about but the critical discourse around his films is dominated by the school that sees him as a 'Catholic' filmmaker. To use the jargon of academia, the meaning of Bresson's films is a contested site in which Catholic film critics have hegemonic control. While the notion of a 'Catholic artist' might be more appropriate to a medieval painter to whom *the world was*

*the Roman Catholic world*, I would like to argue that characterizing a filmmaker who worked in the 1980s in this way tends to limit him because Bresson's importance should be evident to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Bresson described himself as a 'Christian atheist' – which has seen him being appropriated by Catholic film critics – but I propose to approach him from his 'atheist' side, i.e. view him as a secular filmmaker, albeit with a Catholic background - and therefore Catholic motifs in his work. Moreover, it is one thing to recognize that a filmmaker is religious and another to assert that the value of his or her work lies in his/ her religious beliefs.

Another difficulty with the religious interpretation of Robert Bresson's films is that it is 'theory-down' – as a psycho-analytical or a Marxist interpretation would also be – with the difference that the 'theory' employed is theology rather than Marxism or Freudian psychoanalysis. A theoretical position charts a generality of which the interpreted work is only an instance. As has been reiterated earlier, showing that a film is an instance of a general theory would imply that the film is, in certain respects, routine and pretty much like everything else in the same domain. This being the case, how can the Catholic critic argue that Bresson's films are different from those of another 'Jansenist' filmmaker, assuming of course that there is another? Even if there is no other Jansenist filmmaker, the argument can only point to Bresson being 'Jansenist' but not to his being a great artist.

#### On *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950)

*Diary of a Country Priest* is based on a novel by Catholic writer Georges

Bernanos which is written in the first person – as a journal maintained by the sickly young priest of a parish in rural France. The film begins with the Priest arriving in village of Ambricourt and being witness to lovers locked in a furtive embrace - and turning their backs to him when he looks. This sequence virtually sets the tone for the first part which deals with local hostility to the Priest. The second man Fabregars haggles over the funeral expenses of his wife and accuses the church of exploiting the poor. The other characters encountered by the Priest are the Priest of Torcy, a much older man who is worldly wise - if not cynical – and who believes that they are 'at war'. Torcy's friend is Dr Delbende, an unbelieving medical practitioner, rumors of whose unhygienic ways have seen him losing patients. When the young Priest first meets him, 'his hands are unclean after hunting'. The most striking 'moment' in this part of the film is perhaps the catechism class in which only one child – Seraphita – appears to be attentive, her hands bobbing up and down in suppressed excitement at being the only one knowing the answer. But when he appreciates her in private he discovers he has been 'set up'. The girl responds with the maturity of an adult and praises his 'beautiful eyes'. Quite surprised by this, he also finds that the other girls have all been made witness to this 'private' exchange in order to humiliate him. There is a hint of suggestiveness in Seraphita's conduct here because the admission of a grown man's physical beauty is not something one would expect from a girl her age. Although this is later belied when Seraphita (still displaying maturity far beyond her years) administers to him, the child's conduct in this sequence even anticipates Regan's innuendo in *The Exorcist* (1973) in as much as a child

displays sexual maturity and her remarks are directed at a priest. The point here is not that the two films are similar but that both films are set in Catholic milieus and feature children strangely without their customary innocence. Organized religion is a space in which wickedness proliferates, Bresson appears to say – as he did more powerfully in *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) in which the compulsively evil Gerard is shown to sing in a church choir.

There is another moment in *Diary of a Country Priest* a little later after Dr Delbende's funeral (the doctor apparently shot himself) when the protagonist talks to his well-wisher, the priest of Torcy. The two stand a short distance from the church which has been decorated for the funeral. What I find significant is that we see the decorations being removed even as the conversation is in progress and the sense we get is of the church suddenly rendered naked and being reduced to what it essentially is: a cold grey stone edifice.

Bresson's film is based on a deeply religious literary work and it hardly subverts the purpose of the original. Still, it exhibits a kind of ambivalence towards the Church that is palpable. One contributing factor could be that while the novel is in the first person, cinema cannot provide a corresponding viewpoint and we see what the Priest sees as well as his own responses – of which *he* cannot always be aware. There are therefore small differences between what we see happening and what his diary is describing which should be taken note of. This, I suggest, becomes significant in the second part of the film in which the Priest's health improves marginally and he is able to give solace to

people who have resisted, chiefly the Countess and her daughter Chantal.

Chantal appears to hate everyone around her – her father the Count, her mother and her father's lover, the governess. After a conversation with Chantal in which she pours out her scorn at the world, he senses correctly that she has a suicide note with her and asks her for it. Chantal is visibly perturbed and audibly declares him the 'Devil'. While the priest does not succeed in bringing comfort to Chantal, he does succeed with her mother. The Countess is a proud but lonely woman living with the memory of a dead male child. She has become accustomed to her husband's infidelities and no longer cares. As with Chantal, the priest displays such wisdom that the Countess even attributes his words to someone else – he could not have had the experience for them. Although his exchange with the Countess is later misinterpreted, the Priest reconciles her to her position and she acknowledges the help he has rendered her through a letter. The Countess, however, dies the very next morning and the Priest returns to the manor to pay his last respects.

While much of the religious conversation between the Priest and the Countess (as with the priest and Chantal) has the appearance of being rushed through, the sequence in which the priest visits the dead Countess is striking. Everyone in attendance is formally dressed for the occasion while the Priest looks scruffy as he always does and the sense is that he is an intruder barely tolerated; the Count does not even look at him when he passes by on the staircase. "The Count pretended not to see me," says the voice-over but we only see the Priest not taken notice of. To give

the Priest's intimacy with the Countess emphasis, the camera catches the priest kissing her cold forehead in close-up as if there had been a private informal bond – even a mystical communion – between them, not mediated by the institution he has been serving, i.e. the Church.

The Priest has never been close to official power and privilege and his distance from the Count is given emphasis by the bars of the manor gate. He is not shown at the pulpit in church, he visits people personally and his religious exchanges with his congregation are inevitably private. The more closely we look at the protagonist, the more does he appear a mystic rather than a representative of the Church and his power belongs to his own person rather than derived from the institution. The Priest of Torcy who once patronized him acknowledges it when he seeks his blessing at their parting.

The last part of *Diary of a Country Priest* begins with the priest's worsening health and concludes in his death of stomach cancer. His stomach has been unable to stand anything except dry bread soaked in wine and the 'wine' he has been using is a poisonous brew – so the Priest of Torcy tells him – that kills. He is also told that his background implies drunkard ancestors, and his blood was poisoned at birth (he was 'pickled in alcohol' is the way Torcy puts it). While this has a parallel in Renoir's *The Human Beast* (1938) in which the Jacques Lantier has murderous fits because of the alcohol consumed by his ancestors, the association of mental illness with mystical visions/ power is made by Dostoyevsky in *The Idiot* in which the Christ-like figure Prince Myshkin has epileptic fits, commencing with his seeing

things with exceptional clarity. In Bresson's film many of the people in the village regard the priest as a drunkard and the film is ambiguous about the source of his mystical power. The Priest's dying exclamation "All is grace" is not necessarily Bresson affirming Catholicism. This is reported to his friend the Priest of Torcy by another religious outcast, Dufrety and the sense is that if a representative of the Church must attain 'grace' it is only as an outsider.

*Diary of a Country Priest* is ambiguous but it does not display the kind of deliberate ambiguity that European art cinema has been shown to exhibit (9). European art cinema as a single category after 1945, David Bordwell argues, defines itself specifically against the classical Hollywood narrative mode especially with regard to cause-effect linkage between events – and the linkages become looser and more tenuous. Bordwell cites films like Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) in which Anna is lost and never found and Godard's *Breathless* (1959) in which the reasons for Patricia's betrayal of Michel are not known. The art film narrative works by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity. Here, 'realism' is an acknowledgment of 'life's untidiness'. To elaborate, the detective in a whodunit cannot be *accidentally* run over just before he solves a crime but such an occurrence is not impossible in a 'thriller' by Jean-Luc Godard. The protagonists of the art film are not motivated as those in the classical Hollywood film are and their inconsistency, their lack of purpose in films ranging from *Breathless* and Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) to Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975) needs to be interpreted as owing to the real malaises of contemporary life –

alienation, inability to communicate etc. Bordwell suggests that since classical Hollywood cinema is the covert reference point, the audience is invited to interpret the deviations from classical Hollywood storytelling in terms of authorial expressivity, i.e. induce the audience to ask: ‘What is the director trying to say?’ ‘Ambiguity’ therefore becomes a key element that invites interpretation in art cinema and the ‘author’ becomes a key organizing element in the narrative, ‘signature styles’ usually providing clues as to what filmmakers may be meaning.

While *Diary of a Country Priest* has a discernible ‘signature style’ like the films coming under art cinema – those of Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni etc. – the audience is not drawn into interpreting the film in terms of what Bresson is ‘trying to say’. The filmmaker does not become a mediator between the spectator and the world. The ambiguity in *Diary of a Country Priest* has correspondence, instead, with the mystery of the world itself, that will not submit to any doctrine – Catholic or otherwise. If Bresson would suppress intention in his models it is the same ‘intention’ on the part of the artist – to make of the world what it is not, in the guise of ‘expression’ – that he is wary of.

## From Chapter 6: ‘Nation and Transgression: Ideology and the Horror film From India and Pakistan’

### The Pakistani horror film

Unlike Indian cinema which has been well served by film theorists, very little theorizing has apparently done for cinema in Pakistan. This means that we will have to rely entirely on the evidence of the

horror films to draw any conclusions. As in the previous section, I have chosen two Pakistani horror films – set forty years apart but not alike in their motifs. The first film *Zinda Laash* (Khwaja Sarfaraz, 1967) was the first film in Pakistan to be ‘X’ rated and was almost banned. The film is actually a reworking of the story of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* with the difference that Mr Hyde is modeled on the figure of Dracula and is a blood-sucking vampire. In the film Dr. Tabani is experimenting on an elixir which, he believes, will grant him immortality. Matters, however, work out differently and he dies. When his assistant discovers this, she carries his corpse into a crypt in the basement but the scientist comes back to life and is now a vampire as, soon, is the assistant. The rest of the film follows the story of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* quite closely. Dr Aqil, an associate of Dr Tabani, is the vampire’s victim and looking for Aqil is his brother. Aqil had a fiancée named Shabnam and it is her that Tabani is lusting after. After she becomes a vampire – who even abducts children – her brother steps in. Dr Tabani is finally destroyed when the hero prays to God and an accident happens. He dislodges a screen from the window and the sunlight streaming into the room destroys the vampire.

The first observation to be made about *Zinda Laash* is that, where the Indian examples cited in the last section and Bram Stoker’s novel are ‘fantastic’, the film may be defined as ‘uncanny’, i.e.: rational explanations are provided at every step. The film begins with a dedication to God but declines to invoke the occult or even divinity – although it does leave itself open to religious interpretation. Faith, I propose, is sufficiently elastic to allow an Islamic artifact the same qualities as the Cross in the

Dracula films. In an Indian vampire film *Bandh Darwaza* (Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1990) the vampire is equally defenseless against the Cross, the Hindu *Om* and the Koran – as if to demonstrate its faith in secularism.

The accident letting the sunlight in at the conclusion of *Zinda Laash* can be attributed to the hero's prayers but most films about religious belief have no difficulty in introducing God-induced miracles and the film's disinclination here should be taken note of. The deliberate banality of the resolution chosen leads one to interpret the ending as agnostic and the film is perhaps suggesting that there are man-made things outside God's purview. Of course, since the first cause in *Zinda Laash* is the failure of a scientific experiment, it might destroy the compositional unity of the film for religion to provide the eventual solution but the issue is this: why pick on science at all for the initial disturbance? The film faced censor trouble only for its suggestive dances but I would like to argue that just as Indian horror cinema chooses the occult for the initial disturbance as a way of resisting post-colonial modernity, *Zinda Laash* chooses science as a way of resisting the religious nation.

Where *Zinda Lash* is tentative in its horror, Omar Khan's *Zibahkhana* (2007) is almost ferocious. The film was a huge multiplex success in Rawalpindi and a private screening for students in Lahore virtually caused a riot but Benazir's assassination saw it being withdrawn. The film brings together the zombie film (*The Night of the Living Dead*, 1968) and the splatter film (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974) and is, once again, 'uncanny' rather than 'fantastic'. In this film a group of five college students who

set out for a concert and take a short cut across unfamiliar terrain outside the city. When they stop in a patch of degraded forest close to a polluted stream, they run into a bunch of zombies – evidently created by the pollution – one of whom bites a member of the group in the leg, eventually leading to his becoming 'infected' as well. The other young people however escape but only to get deeper into the forest. When they meet a fakir offering to guide them, they admit him into the car until he starts attacking them. The fakir is finally caught under their car but his death is of little avail because they run into a dwelling deeper in the forest, a *zibahkhana* (slaughterhouse) with a burqa-clad cannibal on the loose and it turns out that they are providing human meat to the zombies the group encountered earlier.

While *Zibahkhana* also begins with a prayer to God, it cannot escape one's notice that the film itself is far from religious. Apart from the film providing a first cause – industrial pollution – which is outside the purview of religion, apart from being a critique of the fetish of meat-eating, it uses images associated with religious instruction to evoke horror. Since the fakir is a religious person and the *burqa* is attire prescribed by Islam, having a *burqa*-clad killer/ cannibal may even be considered anti-religious (20). Where the Indian horror films and *Zinda Lash* offer resistance to the dominant ideologies of their respective nations, it is not unreasonable to argue that *Zibahkhana* goes further and is consciously adversarial.

Coming to the spectator profile of the Pakistani horror films, one gets a sense that it is vastly different from that of the Hindi horror film. Industry data is hard to

come by but the Hindi horror film is more successful in single-screen dominated circuits rather than in the multiplexes. This suggests that it is not the upwardly mobile spectators of the metropolitan cities but more those in the smaller towns and in places where admissions are cheaper that are the audiences. The horror film may be addressing a class economically lower than those attuned to the mainstream film, perhaps a public (or an aspect of the public) less integrated with the 'modern nation'. As regards the Pakistani films, no industry data is available but the insider portrayal of the college students in *Zibahkana* as modern and carefree corresponds to those portrayed in the Bollywood youth film – like *Wake up Sid* (2009), for instance, which was a multiplex success. It can be argued on the basis of this limited data that the Pakistani horror film addresses the same class within Pakistan that the mainstream Hindi film addresses within India – the economically middle and upper echelons. This implies that while the dominant ideology of modernity within India is maintained by the upper-class elite, the elite has little or no

control over the dominant ideology in Pakistan which is rigidly Islamic regardless of who is ruling the country politically.

The political factor of pertinence with regard to the creation of Pakistan is that while the Muslim community in India had a very small middle-class; apart from medical doctors, lawyers or clergy, everyone of ability apparently gravitated to high posts in the government or the army. This meant there was a large class gap between the leaders of the Muslim League and their followers. Jinnah was himself elegant and Westernized and far from the devout Muslim that the future leader of a theocratic Islamic state would be, while the bulk of his following was different. Since Pakistan was created on religious grounds, it became Islamic although Jinnah himself might have wanted it to be secular. The elite class represented by the leaders of the Muslim League has continued to rule Pakistan and much of the class is educated abroad but, apparently, their following has gradually imposed its collective will on Pakistan's leadership.

*Mr. M. K. Raghavendra is a Member of the Fipresci-India, based in Bangalore.*