

In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God, and the word was God.' The only fault we can find with this proclamation of the Gospel according to St. Matthew today is the use of the past tense; for the word remains God. Otherwise why should anyone look at a picture and call it a 'text' to be 'read', not 'seen'?

The cinema came in when it did, among other things, as a revolt against the tyranny of words. In the print civilization, reality is described, analysed, assembled, built upon, in myriad ways. For the discipline of words, it is necessary to translate all direct sensory experience into word-symbols, store them in memory, compare them with other such translations and put them to a vast range of uses from poetry to philosophy, nuclear physics to advertising slogans. But words are not direct experience as music or cinema is. And there is a limit to language's ability to translate sensory experience into words; without that limit, there would have been no need to invent music or painting or cinema. There is a whole world of experience in reality or in dream that lies beyond the realm of words. It lies in the area of the ineffable and the inscrutably ambiguous: '*yato vacho nivartantay aprapya manasa saha*': From where words return, unable to comprehend (the reality) with the intellect (*Taittiriya Upanishad, Chapter IV*).

By turning what is basically a picture into a 'text', a beginning is made towards appropriating cinema back into the domain of the print civilization, divesting it of its directness, its non-verbal being, both in the making and the seeing of films. This is so that the keepers of the print civilization can stand guard over non-verbal communication, police and control it in aid of the state or the corporate world or academia. The entire apparatus of education throughout the world puts an overwhelming emphasis on the development of the intellect. It marginalizes the training of the sensibility, inhibits and corrupts the capacity for the direct experience of art. And the more criticism inhabits the realm of abstraction, the further away it gets from the world of direct experience. The word-image of the sensory experience is never the sensory experience itself, for which there is no substitute. What is more, the habit of arranging and rearranging logical abstractions built out of these word-images tends to dehydrate the sensory experience,

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draining it of its life blood, its content of emotional, visceral response and filtering it constantly through the verbal-cerebral process. The difference between a professorial dissertation and a piece of imaginative, non-academic writing on the cinema is that the latter enhances instead of diminishing the quality of the sensory experience. Besides, its focus on the non-verbal is sharper.

"Text" conveys', according to Bill Nichols in his introduction to two hefty volumes rather lamely titled *Movies and Methods*, 'a greater sense of methodological exactitude than the term "movie" or "film"'. Why? 'Partly because it implies that films are manifestations of certain

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characteristics found across a range of works that many non-film-specific methods are adept at analysing' (*Movies and Methods*). In other words, it delivers film into the hands of professors of literature (who today form the large majority of academic film critics) and helps to underplay the most important part of cinema - the non-verbal.

What is there to be gained by marginalizing the distinctiveness of film form by emphasizing the aspects that it might share with non-film? Surely we understand film better by emphasizing its differences from non-film?

The growing co-option of cinema by the universities is encouraging in some ways but fearful in others. 'The number of Ph.Ds in film in the United States', we are told in Bill Nichols' introduction to Part II of *Movies and Methods*, a massive collection of ninety-nine essays, 'rose from approximately two hundred in 1964 to more than two thousand today' (*Movies and Methods*).

There is only one essay, in these tomes of 'political correctness', that deals with non-western cinema. It takes Gilo Pontecorvo's *Battle of*

Algiers as its central 'text' and holds it up as a model of politically correct film-making. It is ironical that the whole of Asian cinema should be left out of the discourse in what must be a prime example of the marginalization of the exploited that the book's ideology denounces so loudly. There is a quiet assumption that whatever is true of western cinema is *ipso facto* applicable to the non-western as well, or worse, that it is not worth considering at all, never mind Kurosawa or Ozu, Ray or Ghatak.

There is a still more careless yet fundamental assumption at the back of all these theories: that intellect and sensibility are interchangeable categories, that in fact, they are one

and the same thing. The arrogance of the assumption is such that one of the ninety-nine essays in this 1500-page collection says, and many others imply, that a film is no more than the sum of its parts; the parts are eminently analysable and each ingredient that goes into the making of it is identifiable. If that were indeed so, any competent professor would be able to make arresting films that moved the minds of millions of men and women. Yet most of them would hesitate to underwrite that proposition. Why? Is there some peculiar absence that would hold them back? Jean Renoir solved that problem perfectly when he said 'Give everybody the same story and ask them to make a film from it; You will soon find out who is an artist and who is not' (*Conversation with Jean Renoir, 1948*). Ideologically correct cinema does not necessarily move the minds of men and women. Of course, there are those who will say that it is not important to move minds; to be correct is enough. But you will invariably find that film scholars concern themselves with the most successful films either in terms of

the box office or in widespread critical esteem or both, i.e. films that have moved minds.

Actually it is infinitely more difficult to create a living character than to depict a politically correct one; for the latter, all you have to do is to assemble the right traits to construct what may be no more like a living character than a scarecrow. It is a problem very like painting a still life or *A Man with a Hat in His Hand*. In cinema it takes nothing to write that line in a film script but it is infinitely difficult to make him come alive on screen. This is what frustrates the unintuitive intellectual, the intellectual without sensibility, makes him feel inferior, and is responsible for much of his perverse desire to act the sovietique policeman of the arts dealing out decrees on political correctness, creating a hostile relationship between the critic and the artist, making criticism incapable of interacting with the creative. Indeed one Indian film scholar told me: 'Why should I want to interact with the creative person?' There is no regard here for the dynamics of the relationship between the two which is of considerable importance to the spiritual sustenance of both. The intellectual wants to take the sensory experience for granted and to build superstructures of meaning on it and thereafter to inhabit a world of meanings alone.

To which Susan Sontag's rejoinder: 'Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusions of interpretation of art today poison our sensibilities. In a culture whose already classic dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon the art. Even more, it is the intellect's revenge on the world. To interpret is to impoverish, deplete the world - in order to set up a shadow world of meanings ... in most modern instances, interpretation amounts to a philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone' (*Against Interpretation*).

What Susan Sontag said in the late sixties, is many times more true today, with the proliferation of Ph.Ds. One cannot help being left with the feeling that the present-day advocates of so-called 'scientific criticism' and enemies of 'liberal-humanist' writing are strikingly similar to the mediaeval scholastics whose 'philosophy of beauty was often a purely verbal matter.

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To examine such a proposition let us take the case of Rabindranath Tagore, one of the most important figures in the reformist-rationalist enterprise of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose long shadow still extends over large groups of the intelligentsia.

The fact is that knowledge of Sanskrit and especially the *Upanishads* was central to Brahmoism from Raja Rammohun Roy to Pandit Shivnath Shastri to Tagore. What they did was to adapt Hinduism to the needs of the age by eliminating the encrustations of superstitious obstacles to progress without giving up their essential *Hindutva*. At a time of extreme decadence they used both persuasion and confrontation to make the country evade mass conversion to Christianity and to wake up to the rational side of the mind, reducing the power of unmediated tradition. Rammohun Roy was instrumental in having the institution of *sati* banned and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar in forcing society to accept widow remarriage. All of them combined to abolish polygamy. It is their positive acts which created an intellectual elite that forms the leadership of the opposition to Hindu national fascism today. Without their labours of the time the Indian left or New Left would not have come into being. And it is not as if their work is over; one look at the mighty infrastructure of superstition that survives in society, reinforced by the rise of religious fundamentalism, convinces one of the overwhelming need to reassert the mediating power of rational thought, and, in some respects, to reinvoke modernism.

Those like, say, Rabindranath Tagore, who did so were not thereby alienated from their tradition or from the myths that have provided spiritual support to large masses of people for thousands of years. Indeed much of Rabindranath's poetry or his songs are impossible to understand without identifying his deeply *vaishnav* roots and his basis in classical learning. Take the well-known Tagore song *kyano jamini na jetay jagalena nath / bela holo mari laajay*: 'Lord, why did you not wake me before the night was over / Now that it is day, I will die of shame'. If you did not have the Radha-Krishna myth in your bloodstream and

instinctively invoked the nightly tryst of a young married woman with an adolescent both of whom are human and divine at the same time, if you had not in fact ceased to be conscious of that fact, it would be impossible for you to get the full emotive value of the words. Or, for that matter, the music wedded to it. Thousands of such examples can be given from Tagore's works. Indeed, in the entire Tagorean tradition there is no question of reading and learning about or self-consciously cultivating myth; it is in one's bloodstream, an integral part of one's consciousness, of even the dream world that lives within one. Myths do not remain thereby unchanged for ever; they naturally keep in step with every reorientation of the self to changing realities and to all desire for change. Tagore's literature is replete with this constant, dynamic, reinvention of the equation of tradition and change.

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Among other buzzwords that need

Free criticism represents a revolt against the tyranny of the academic labelling industry which has of late been working overtime. Very often the grand announcement of a new label means no more than old wine in new bottles.

re-examination are 'Brechtian alienation', the 'epic theatre' as opposed to 'illusionism' and 'Aristotelian catharsis'. Almost the entire Indian theatre and narrative tradition has been one of alienation for more than two thousand years. Our epics have stories within stories, our plays have *sutradharas* or presenters who break into the narrative; both serve to keep their audiences completely aware of the fact that they are watching a play or listening to a story and prevent them from surrendering themselves to an illusion of reality. This is also true of the folk theatre. Obviously the total influence of these forms in India for some three thousand years have been immensely greater than that of Brecht, whose theatre was a minority cult in Germany and had relatively wider impact only outside his own country, largely in English-speaking regions and mainly confined to *Galileo*. On the rising Nazism in Germany he had no impact of the effective scale his plays sought

implicitly in their ideological projection.

It would be idle to assert that those who adopted the illusionism of the novel as a fictional form for modern India were not aware of the epic or the alienating features of Indian traditional theatre. They did what they did because they felt the new form would have a greater impact and in this, over a period of more than 150 years, they have been proved right. The Indian novel in a dozen languages has come to embody the quintessentially Indian experience of the entire modern period on a mind-boggling scale. Neither their illusionism nor the shades of Aristotelian catharsis in them have anything intrinsically invalid about them; more than anything else, the question of the novel has been, and remains, a question of the social and ethical value of a particular form at a given point of time. It is obvious that through the immersion of oneself in the experiences of the other, the audience comes closest to transcendence from self-love and is changed

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The problem on the other hand is that at the heart of India's film studies, there is no urge to redefine categories in the light of the country's own tradition and its modern experience. Indeed the capacity to do so is not even considered central to the issue. There has been a wholesale importation of premises, assumptions, categories and definitions from the west, which has a well organized, relatively free academic structure that readily rewards talent, allows the individual enough support and enough freedom to develop himself/herself. It is not surprising that some of the best minds from the Third World should rush to this intellectual haven

and flee - physically or spiritually - the mindless roadblocks to creativity that Third World structures set up in order to inflict the power of the average on the talented. In one way or another, countries like India regard talent as an obstacle to the vested interests of the untalented and dub the pursuit of excellence as elitism. 'Vulgar Marxism' is still a powerful force and, along with rightist philistinism, lends muscle power to all forms of opposition to intellectual growth.

Nor is it surprising that the West's combination of freedom and discipline should give rise to systems of knowledge and a network of theoretical structures which represent the cutting edge of progress in understanding society and the arts, among other things. These understandably influence the *avant-garde* of Indian scholarship and impose themselves upon the disarray by which the Indian scholar is constantly surrounded.

This in turn prevents the growth of theoretical and speculative structures from within the Indian soil, firmly connected to Indian history, tradition, languages, literatures and arts, yet open to ideas from elsewhere which they can accept on merit by their own standards of judgement. The illusion of belonging to an international fraternity obscures the Indian scholar's awareness of the absence of firm indigenous foundations to his/her thinking. Many of the influential critics/scholars do not even have Indian language skills of a respectable order. All discourses and judgements tend to follow patterns emanating from the contemporary West and are mostly conducted in English. The need to study Panini's unique grammar or the narrative strategies of ancient Indian epics, works of fiction and theatre, murals, and bas reliefs, the edicts of Indian *shilpashastras* and to bring them to bear on the study of cinema through joint manoeuvres with other specializations and holistic studies along with them has not even been realized. Without this, Indian film studies will never have an independent foundation or acquire the capacity to fuse or reorder thought streams from all directions to give them a new universality.

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