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A Frame book for Analyzing Films

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING FILMS,
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
MIRCH MASALA

PROJECT II

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INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

In an essay in 1945, Eisenstein described three levels at which films could be looked at. A LONG SHOT film theory looked at films in order to unravel their political and social implications. MEDIUM SHOT film theory focussed on the human scale of the film, its story, its characters, its drama etc., and finally CLOSE-UP theory broke down a film into its elements and took a close look at them in order to reveal their contribution to the overall film. Most analysts look at films from the first and second viewpoints - what is ignored is the CLOSE-UP view, a view which could reveal to us how cinematic variables like editing, sound, light, lenses, camera movements, framing, colours etc. are being used in harmony to create moods, ambiances and an expressive power which is purely cinematic. As a consequence, an analysis of Tagore's NASHTANEER and Ray's CHARULATA (Ray's film version of NASHTANEER) would have the same tonal values. The reason seems clear : most analysts come from a literary tradition and extend a methodology for literary analysis onto films.

With the growth of Semiotics as an important discipline, this is remedied as Semiotics has been a study of signs and the sign systems for cinema and literature being different, analysis specific to the medium results.

This paper then is an attempt to integrate the above-mentioned views and further develop an elaborate framework for looking at Indian films. MIRCH MASALA is being used as a vehicle for developing this framework. There are a number of reasons for this choice. MIRCH MASALA has been funded by N.F.D.C. and has been a fair commercial success, though its success is partly due to the 'TAX FREE' status that it enjoyed. The film uses a lot of commercial idioms and yet maintains a distance from the regular commercial outpourings. Thirdly, Ketan Mehta, the film's director claims to be politically conscious (CINEMA IN INDIA, Vol. 1) and hence would be conscious of the political implications of the choices that he would be making in the design of the film. And finally, a CLOSE-UP

view does reveal a conscious selection of cinematic variables and their appropriate usage within a frame work of classicism.

In the final analysis, this project is an attempt to initiate a process of looking at Indian films from a non-literary standpoint. While it is extremely important to evaluate society's cultural outpourings, it seems equally important to examine the codes through which society expresses itself, for it is often within these codes that society's values are concealed. If this is so, analysis demands that surface manifestations be peeled layer by layer so as to uncover these codes. Increasingly there seems to be a considerable consensus, following Thomas Kuhn, about the speculative character of scientific activity. If this is so in the area of natural sciences, it would be true more so in the area of films, which have often been compared to the Rorschach ink-blot tests. As Dudley Andrew puts it, Film Theory has been and will be a reflective theory.

MIRCH MASALA

CHAPTER 2

Key characters in Mirch Masala :

SUBHEDAR: Apparently a wandering tyrant of minor stature. Has a private army of his own and lives in a tent outside the village.

SONBAI: Sonbai is a worker in a Mirchi factory. Aggressive by nature and committed to her husband, who is jobless but lands himself a job with the Railways as the story proceeds.

MUKHIYA: The village chief, despotic by nature and servile towards the Subhedar. Mukhiya's wife Saraswati is tired of her husband's lack of concern towards her and is also very keen to educate her five year old daughter.

MASTERJI: The village schoolmaster, progressive by nature and is also a Swaraji and interested in the education of women.

ABU MIYA: The security man at the Mirchi factory. Has been at work for forty years and as he puts it, 'has seen these women grow up'

RADHA: A woman worker at the factory and in love with the mukhiya's brother, a love that is attempting to fight the class barrier.

PERIOD: Some time before Independence.
Not made clear in the film.

Area: Somewhere in Gujarat.

Griffith, writing in the 1920s, described his theory of pacing in movies: "For a quick keen estimate of a motion picture, give me a boy of ten and a girl of fifteen—the boy for action and the girl for romance. Few things have happened in their lives to affect their natural reactions". MIRCH MASALA is intended to be a woman's film. The equilibrium of the village is disturbed by the camping of Subhedar and his private army. It takes the specific form of Subhedar wanting to relate to Sonbai physically and Sonbai aggressively refusing to give in. This polarises the village opinion, with the men on one side and the women on the other, in an alliance with the schoolmaster and Abu Miya. The conflict is resolved when the women turn violent in their own way.

What follows is a sequence by sequence description of the film. The listing is important as these sequences will constantly be referred to in the analysis.

S E Q U E N C E S

1. Sonbai and other women filling up their vessels at the lake. Sound of horses. Subhedar and his private army approach them. All women apart from Sonbai run away. A short, heated exchange between Sonbai and one army man, and Subhedar asks his men to go the other side of the lake. Listens to Sonbai and then bends down, cups his hands to drink the water that Sonbai pours out for him.
2. Mukhiya with his wife at their place. Saraswati asks Mukhiya when his time of return is to be. Mukhiya is non-committal and rude. Walks out of the house to be intercepted by his brother who wants to tell him something. Mukhiya does not have the time for him.
3. Masterji finishes with his school and comes down to the road inffront of the school. Meets Saraswati with her daughter. Exchange of greetings. Masterji suggests that Saraswati admit her daughter to the school.

4. Masterji walking down a village street. Villagers hanging around the Mukhiya deride Masterji for his views on Swaraj and snatch his newspaper away.

5. Short montage of Subhedar's men and horses having a bath in the lake.

6. Sonbai along with other women coming back to the village after filling their vessels. Mukhiya and his henchmen pass derisory comments. Sonbai returns home, wakes up husband. The postman arrives with a letter. The illiterate husband, wild with ecstasy, gets the letter read by the Masterji. He has got a job with the Railways.

7. Subhedar and his men raid the village. One small boy gets trampled by the horses. Masterji comes and picks up the child.

8. Subhedar outside his tent. Some villagers squatting around an old hand-wound gramaphone. Subhedar wants to demonstrate this device to the villagers.

He asks one of his henchmen to get a record from inside the tent. He comes out of the tent, trips over and breaks the record. Subhedar beats him up mercilessly. Gets another record and plays it. Awe and wonder in the eyes of the villagers. Masterji comes along with the hurt child. Derisory comments from the Mukhiya, Subhedar and the villagers.

9. Sonbai along with her husband at their place. Sonbai expresses her insecurity while he packs. He emphasises that there is no future in the village.

10. Mukhiya's brother creeps up to Radha's house and tries to call her out, keeping out of sight from her father.

11. Garba dance sequence. Women dance while the men-folk watch.

12. Radha and Mukhiya's brother in deep physical embrace. Radha's father comes from behind and discovers both of them. Angry, he turns violent.

13. Subhedar at night in his tent. He has been expecting Sonbai in his tent. Instead Laxmi comes; Sonbai has refused.

14. Shots of women working in the factory.
15. Subhedar outside his tent feeding pigeons.
16. Mukhiya comes back home. Mukhiya's wife does not allow him in.
17. Subhedar gets a villager who has not repaid his debt tied up to a post. Sonbai goes by. Subhedar follows her to the lake where Sonbai is washing her clothes. Subhedar watches her through his telescope. Sonbai sees him; frightened, she runs away.
18. Saraswati on the way to the school. She has got her daughter admitted to the school.
19. Radha's father approaches Mukhiya to persuade him to accept his daughter's hand in marriage. Mukhiya rudely refuses.
20. Subhedar outside his tent getting shaved. Sonbai on her way to the lake.
- Subhedar confronts her and she slaps him. Subhedar's men chase Sonbai. The chase ends with Sonbai running into the factory and getting Abu Miya to lock the gate.
21. Subhedar orders the factory owner to get the gate opened.
22. Abu Miya refuses to open the gate.
23. Mukhiya hears that his daughter has started going to school. He collects her from school and brings her home forcibly.
24. Subhedar in conference with the Mukhiya. Subhedar demands that Sonbai be brought to him so that violence be avoided. Mukhiya insists on a discussion with the villagers.
25. Villagers collect at the Mukhiya's place. It is decided that Sonbai be delivered to the Subhedar's tent and that he be made to promise that he would not be making similar demands in future.
26. Saraswati, hearing her decision, decides to do something by collecting the women in the village.

27. Villagers meet Subhedar and tell him about their decision. Subhedar, displeased with Masterji who has been instrumental in insisting on the condition gets him tied up. Masterji along with other prisoners attack the village men and are beaten up.

28. Villagers return to the village. They are confronted by their wives. Saraswati gets herself locked by her husband.

29. Women working in the factory. Male villagers collect outside the factory and try to persuade Abu Miya to open the gate. Abu Miya refuses. One woman tries to persuade Sonbai to go. Sonbai refuses. Meanwhile one worker gives birth to a baby girl.

30. Subhedar asks his men to break the door open. In the shots that are exchanged following the collapse of the door, Abu Miya is shot. Subhedar enters the factory and the women attack him by throwing mirchi powder on his face...

THE LONG-SHOT VIEW

CHAPTER 3

The Long-shot view, following Eisenstein's categories, looks at films so as to unravel their political and social implications. What then is necessary is a framework within which these implications could be worked out, for they often lie deep below the surface of the film.

Let us examine the structure of mainstream cinema. Characters are introduced and their initial states pinned down. Something then happens to disturb this initial state. The tension then generated is resolved towards the end and equilibrium is restored. The forces that bring about this resolution can be described as the director's world-view- for him this is the resolution of the problems which concern him. Thus the director is constantly identifying and prioritising problems and then bringing about their resolution. Thus, in commercial mainstream Hindi cinema, the 'hero' is often an uprooted person, pitted against a hostile world with its class structure and power system. Attributes that come to his rescue are physical strength, honesty, integrity, a loving and caring mother, a committed girl-friend etc. This then, at a very simplistic level, would define the commercial films'.

world-view¹. While it is true that all films have political and social messages imbricated in them, there are some films which are explicitly political. The explicit politics would reflect itself in the amount of importance given to the role of the state (the legitimate arm of repression) in the film and the conflict between power-groups in society. Thus Eisenstein's *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* would be explicitly political when it 'talks' about the mutiny of the crew against the ship's officers and finally the Czar's army coming to the rescue of the officers. Another example would be Costa Gavra's *STATE OF SIEGE* (1973), a film about an European's attempt to expose United States power in Latin America by attempting to look at how it teaches repressive techniques for the capture and torture of Leftists. These examples at the two extreme ends of history of cinema are examples of Classicism—they represent impulses of story telling at a political level. Ever since the late 50s, there has been a sharper attack on classical film-making, with its emphasis on narrative structures,

1. Sudhir Kakar argues that the popular Hindi film, in the final instance, is a 'collective fantasy containing unconscious material and the hidden wishes of a large number of people'. While this may be true, it is at one level reductionist and deterministic—one would expect a lot of similarities in the films being churned out. However, it is the differences rather than the similarities which are more interesting and difficult to isolate for they occur at deeper layers. It is these differences which reflect a Manmohan Desai worldview, a Kader Khan worldview, a Ramesh Sippy worldview. At a certain level, they do exercise choices!

identification with characters, clever twists and turns, an uninterrupted, unquestioning trajectory of cause and effect, making certain that the audience will want and be able to follow the developing emotions, and finally, a satisfying conclusion in which all questions raised in the film are laid to rest.

"There is no democracy in a system where the spectator pays \$4.00 and sits in fascinated silence before a spectacle designed to entice him by its mise-en-scene, designed to route him through a narrative by a network of opposing characters, camera angles, glances, and the master shots. Although he pays for it, the viewer is the plaything in the movies" (DUDLEY ANDREW, 1984)

Modernism in cinema attempts to prevent the spectator from slipping easily, through structures of presentation into an emotional world of character and emotion. 'The Modernist undertaking interrupts and questions narrative movement and the completeness of the fictive world that it creates... these filmmakers (ANTONIONI, GODARD, RESNAIS)

began implying that happiness was not always fun, that the pleasures of the narrative had to be sought out and worked for, and that this work would be liberating. Modernist cinema was a political process in the sense that it broke with the authoritarian grasp of the old closed forms and gave freedom to the spectator to think and feel, to draw conclusions rather than only accept them. It was a psychological process as well, preventing the viewer from identifying with the events on the screen. (ROBERT PHILIP KOLKER, 1983)

The Modernist impulse, it seems to me, is constantly destroying old codes of expression and working out newer ones. Modernism thus is a tendency which is constantly carrying out a polemic with previous traditions of film-making (both Classical and Modernist) and hence carrying out a polemic with society which these films represent.

One would argue that political films appeal for a change in status quo, whether it is leftwards or rightwards. Sharper the change in status quo demanded, more is the political characteristic of the film. A two-dimensional matrix of form and content might help in locating how political a film is.

HIGHLY POLITICAL	Political Content + Modernist Form
	Non-political Content + Modernist Form
	Political Content + Classical Form
Non-political	Non-Political Content + Classical Form

One could possibly now examine the film taken up for analysis: MIRCH MASALA. At one level classicism seems to prevail: the equilibrium in the village is disturbed by Subhedar and his private army (refer chapter 2). It takes its sharpest manifestation in Subhedar wanting to physically relate to Sonbai against her desire. The women collectively 'destroy'¹ the Subhedar. Ketan Mehta works up his audience's emotions (a girl child being born- sequence 29, Sonbai, helpless and fatigued, chased by the private army- sequence 20, the killing of Abu Miya- sequence 30, etc.) Camera and the editing contribute significantly in working up emotions and resolving them (refer Close-up View). In a matter of two and a half hours, Mehta 'says' that the only way out of the quagmire is through collective action and education (the schoolmaster tells fellow-villagers that to understand swaraj, one would have to study!) and that it is in the productive sphere that overthrow is possible (women are shown in a sense of

1. More on 'destroying' in the Close-up View

harmony with each other at the factory and despite differences, take their decisions collectively. The music is lilting as they playfully throw mirchis at each other, taking a break from work. Interestingly, there is no supervisor; Mehta is clearly avoiding complexities! The supervisor's contradictory location in the production process would have created problems; in mainstream cinema one is always trying to polarise one's characters, as I will try to establish in the Middle-shot View).

Finally MIRCH MASALA is a women's film- the issue is one of rape and its victims are women. However Mehta does not build up Sonbai's character significantly to allow a high level of identification and sympathy which would have made the film typically classical. One is distant from Sonbai as one does not have too much information about her.

On the other hand, Saraswati's character is built up significantly- the number of incidents involving her are more intense so as to generate empathy. She is lonely

ignored by her arrogant husband who is clearly relating to a number of women. She tries to educate her daughter (the first girl in the village to attend a school) and her husband turns violent. She organises food for the women in the locked masala factory and collects women to do 'something about the problem'. And Mehta does not tell us what happens to Saraswati after her husband locks her up. Similarly, the school-teacher , shown in very sympathetic light throughout the film, is left suspended after being beaten up by the Mukhiya.

If leaving tensions unresolved were the only characteristics of Modernism, MIRCH MASALA is a film with a heady mixture of Modernism and Classicism. But Ketan Mehta has structured his film so smoothly that there could be no doubts about it: MIRCH MASALA is poor Classicism.

Modernism as discussed earlier, is clearly a polemic against old codes of construction. It tries to establish new ones and yet continues to argue against old ones. In Godard's WEEKEND for example, a foursome are riding down a

highway. The ~~four~~ are tightly framed. One can hear shouts from vehicles as they pass by. Godard thereby arouses our curiosity but refuses to show us what those shouts are about. The camera, poised on the hood of the car, continues to keep the ~~four~~some framed. Another sequence from the same film: the couple caught up on a highway jam. Godard proceeds to laterally track for 10 minutes, the highway with its traffic totally stagnant and people engaged in all forms of activities. These 10 minutes are probably irrelevant to the story of the couple. This quiet lateral track forces one into a state of reflection not entirely unconnected with the state of the relationship that the couple is going through. These, then are radical departures from established methods of film-making. There are no such radical departures which are operating constantly and vehemently in MIRCH MASALA.

THE MEDIUM SHOT VIEW

CHAPTER 4

The problem in cinema is clear- one of using concrete images and sounds for making abstract statements of a complex nature. In the chapter on Close-up view, attempt will be made to show how cinematic ~~variables~~ have been used to create moods and ambiances appropriate to the filmic twists and turns of MIRCH MASALA. In this chapter, two categories which are related to the raw materials will be explored. These are Identification and Objective Correlative. I call them raw materials because the elements of these categories are independent of film technology- they are related to characterisation and sets and surroundings. Film technology would ultimately objectify these elements onto celluloid and appropriately (or inappropriately transform them- lenses, lighting, editing, sound, music etc. would further transform this raw material.

The strategy that mainstream commercial cinema has evolved seems to me to be this: Through a number of incidents (sub-plots) polarise the characters into extremes of simple human characteristics: powerful, kind,

benevolent, caring, oppressive, violent shrewd, manipulative and so on. These could be called nodes, which then interact with each other according to the main plot to create a complex, vibrating system which seeks stability. The closer this system is to the psyche of the individual, which in turn is informed by the collective consciousness, more relevant is the interaction between the viewer and the film. 'Committed Cinema' has always been trying to make this node complex by itself- hence the absence of drama- as it refuses to polarise its characters into extremes of human behaviour. It might be mentioned here that thesis is a simplification of sorts and needs to be worked out in greater detail.

In Mirch Masala, Mehta seems to be hesitant to polarise his characters. He does so with remarkable rapidity as the Mukhiya the Subhedar, the Masterji and Saraswati are considered, but leaves the key protagonist Sonbai upto our imagination. While the close-ups, expressions, her

relationship with her husband, her interactions with the Subhedar do give us some information, it seems muted. It is here that the committed, sensitive observer in Mehta is at loggerheads with the commercial one.

Objective Correlative in cinema takes the form of consciously chosen surroundings and objects and imbuing them with meaning so that interactions between the surroundings and the objects and the protagonists can lead to projections of states of mind which would be difficult to project in cinema without resorting to words which in any case would make cinema literary and hence uncinematic. The example from MIRCH MASALA would possibly make it clear. The subhedar has managed to impress the villagers with his gramaphone (sequence 8). The power that the Subhedar wields has already been made clear by showing his private army (Sequence 1), and their plundering of the village (Sequence 7, which interestingly precedes sequence 8). The gramaphone thus becomes the objectification of the power relationship between the subhedar and the villagers. Thus when the servant accidentally breaks the record, it has the undertone of

a threat to the power relationship. Hence the Subhedar's extreme fury, which at one level is out of proportion with the folly. Mehta here uses the cinematic cliche of slow motion to underline the fury. The gramaphone appears a number of times and becomes a constant reminder of the power relationship. When the Subhedar is about to make love to one of the village women, the record gets stuck in a groove, indicating the weaknesses of the Subhedar.

The other major example is of the mirchi factory. The Subhedar wants to physically relate to Sonbai though she is unwilling to do so. Sonbai, defenceless and defiant, runs into the mirchi factory (sequence 20). She is evidently terrified and the drama around the factory is the drama in her mind, which the film would be hard put to project otherwise. However, the immense possibility that existed in this objective correlative of the factory has not been fully explored by Mehta; the strong drama is too brief. Interaction between the

factory, its occupants and the men outside could possibly have heightened the representation of Sonbai's state of mind.

An interesting example in this context is Kurosawa's Throne of Blood, his filmed version of Macbeth. In Shakespeare's Macbeth, Birnham Woods get a few lines of vague description. In Throne of Blood, Kurosawa has a lot of sequences revolving around the forests. Horses thunder through it, the key protagonists get lost in it, and Kurosawa spends a lot of time showing their way out. The forest is clearly the representation of the key protagonist's mind. And in the end, it is the forest which brings about the destruction of Washizu (Macbeth). 'Kurosawa has at least this much in common with other great film makers: his abilities to imbue a place with such deep meanings that the place often seems to take charge and structure the narrative on its own' (J. Blumenthal in Julius Bellone, 1970).

THE CLOSE UP VIEW

CHAPTER 5

This chapter will examine how cinematic variables such as lenses, camera angles, editing, sound framing, colour etc. have been used in Mirch Masala to contribute to the overall film. Two categories will be useful here before some detail analysis is done: they are Realism and Expressionism.

Let us, as Andy Warhol did, examine the output of a camera set in motion, shooting a sleeping man. The output of this process would bear a direct correspondence with the raw material- the sleeping man (apart from a transformation of 3 dimension space to a 2-dimensional plane). This would constitute the extreme end of Realism. On the other hand, let us examine the murder scene in Psycho- the montage consisting of 45 shots edited out over 85 seconds. The fragmentation of space is 'unreal' (but the) overall effect is one of expressing the brutality of the murder. Andy Warhol celebrated the raw material in front of the lens and Hitchcock the power of technology to transform reality. These two examples are representative of two dominant tendencies in film-making- Realism and Expressionism. These two, however are

extreme poles of a continuum and often operate in harmony and create levels of 'meanings'.

What follows is an examination of Mehta's expressionist repertoire.

In the opening sequence, Sonbai pours out water to the Subhedar. This obviously has its own sexual overtones. Mehta presumably wants to warn the audience about the implications for the future. He does so by cutting to hysterical women running away from the soldiers. At one level, it seems to be providing pure information in contrasting Sonbai and the other women. But the hysterical shrieking has the function of informing us of the impending danger. The reason is that we are already tense when the water is being poured and the shrieks orchestrate our feelings.

In sequence 30, the soldiers attempt breaking down the door of the factory by using a wooden log. They come rushing with the log against the door and to emphasise

and indicate the impact, Mehta cuts to the women reeling backwards though they are in no way physically affected by the blow on the door.

Sequence 11 is a dance sequence. As the dance proceeds, Mehta constantly increases the cutting rate with the tempo of the dance increasing.

Sequence 30 mentioned earlier, has the soldiers trying to ram the door down. The soldiers start moving towards the door and the moment the door is about to make contact with the door, Mehta cuts to a shot taken from below. This sudden change in camera position has the effect of creating psychological disorientation appropriate to the situation.

Shankar's going away (sequence 4) is indicated by the sound of a train which is immediately followed by a montage of soldiers' horses running to indicate the changing power relationship between Sonbai and the Subhedar.

Mehta uses the slow motion repeatedly in the film- always to indicate and emphasise violence. The record-breaking sequence (sequence 8), the chase sequence (sequence 20) when Sonbai falls on the Mirchis, Subhedar falling off his horse and the women throwing mirchi powder (sequence 30); the Subhedar is not only overpowered, he is also destroyed. Perhaps repeated use of this cinematic cliche also destroys and dilutes the impact.

A part of the chase sequence (sequence 20) is shot in a cactus field, with Sonbai running through it. This shot is in telephoto- she consequently barely seems to be running though her actions indicate that she is running very fast. This indicates the futility of her own speed as she is being chased by soldiers on horseback.

Mehta uses two devices repeatedly- the low angle camera to indicate power and camera movements to create a sense of distance and detachment. In sequence 8, while all the villagers are listening to

the gramaphone, the camera observes them while moving around the group. This forces us to look at the whole event in a detached manner and reflect on the relationship between the villagers and the Subhedar.

The final sequence (sequence 30) has an interesting subjective shot. The women come in pairs and throw mirchi powder at the Subhedar. Mehta cuts to a subjective shot to force in audience identification with the Subhedar- the mirchi is thrown at the audience.

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Andrew, Dudley

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