

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Lecture

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Film Criticism and Academic Film Study

Following is the full text of the 2nd Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Lecture delivered by MK Raghavendra on 20 November 2021

I am deeply honored to have been chosen to deliver the 2nd Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Lecture, more so because of the luminaries present on the occasion including Mr Klaus Eder General Secretary of FIPRESCI. The topic chosen today is of particular relevance to film critics because of the increasing importance of cinema to the academia, the film studies departments which have only now become legitimate because of film gaining ground as a discipline. The issue for film critics is what - as writers and critics rather than academics - their vocation means, and whether they can make common cause with academics in film studies departments. There is still considerable confusion in the area - even among academics - and I thought it needed to be resolved.

To begin with, film criticism and the academic study of film are disciplines which are very far apart. The latter has a different approach to cinema from what we normally understand as film criticism and is not simply a deeper way of doing the same thing. 'Theory' plays a big role in academic film study that it does not do in film criticism, but this aspect needs elaboration.

Film criticism (which is what FIPRESCI promotes) is basically prompted by cinephilia, the primary interest of the practitioner being in cinema. Its purpose is the growth of cinema, especially the improvement of quality in it. Academic film study today is, by and large though not always, prompted by an interest in other fields and only chooses cinema as the territory for investigation. Examples would be women's studies, semiotics, psychology and cultural studies. Cultural studies, incidentally, is not a general

study of culture but a discipline that tries to investigate how contesting ideologies are fighting for control or domination in the cultural space.

The earliest film theorists - what is called classical film theory - were actually cinephiles - Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Rudolph Arnheim, up to Andre Bazin in the 1950s. They were interested primarily in what films were and what they should be. *Bazin was both critic and theorist. It is no accident that Bazin's students in the Cahiers du Cinema* (of which he was the editor and they were critics) later became filmmakers and went on to initiate the French New Wave, those like Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, Francois Truffaut and Claude Chabrol.

But the tendency from the 1970s onwards was very different, and this was due to the radicalization of film study. Theorists were positing that all films were commodities whether purporting to be high art or entertainment. Given this fact, *The Avengers* and Tarkovski's films should not be studied with hierarchical divisions separating them but as the same, as products. Even politically radical films like *Battle of Algiers* were essentially commodities created by the capitalist system and consumed by a paying public.

Later theory - like the semiotics of Christian Metz - refused to distinguish between films. All films were simply a collection of signs and what mattered was the relationship between the sign and what it signified. As a parallel in literature Roland Barthes said the author was dead, that is that all literature should be treated only as texts. Shakespeare was to be on par with pulp literature as a text.

Film theory today is highly political but not in terms of the political content of the films. It is more in terms of what role film itself plays. For instance, Laura Mulvey is famous for the term ‘male gaze’ and her postulate is that cinema promotes scopophilia or some kind of voyeurism. This being the case, the task of theory is to destroy the pleasure of cinema since that itself is suspect. Compare this to film criticism which subsists on the fact that cinema gives people pleasure.

Because of this development writing on cinema takes three paths. The first is film reviewing which is simply the immediate evaluation of a film, whether good or bad based on analysis. It relies on insights which can be quite profound. It is not the purveying of opinions, which is what most reviewing has unfortunately become since ‘great’ and ‘awful’ are said without argument. Reviews are published in newspapers, magazines, online publications and blogs. World-famous reviewers were those like Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker*, Derek Malcolm of the *Guardian*, who is familiar to those of us in India. The second path is essayistic or intellectual criticism. It takes a longer view and it is a more reflective response than reviewing, which is immediate. It could look at the oeuvre of a filmmaker, could make cultural associations with literature or painting, could also place a body of work in a political context. Chidananda Dasgupta was an essayistic film critic like many others including myself. His book *The Painted Face* was one of the first book-length efforts to write on popular cinema in India. In India essayistic criticism is published in magazines/journals like Frontline, Caravan, EPW. Essayistic criticism is also a product of cinephilia although your interest may then go on to other things like culture, the tastes of the filmgoing public etc.

The third kind is academic film criticism which is primarily interested in other areas of

enquiry. Very often an academic studying a film is not interested in what the filmmaker is trying to say, where its sympathies lie. It reads ‘against the grain’, often analyzing the artist’s phobias using the film only as evidence. A film critic is interested in what a film means to its audience while an academic is interested in what it reveals under ‘clinical investigation’. To give you a parallel, we listen to a joke because it is funny. An academic may make a Freudian study of it but that won’t tell you why it is funny.

This brings us to the basic distinction between film criticism and academic film study. Film critics love cinema and write about it. Film criticism deals with those areas that the audience responds to. Film academics are interested in other areas and film is only the space where they test out theories. Their interpretation of cinema does not tally with what audiences understand. Academics who are interested primarily in cinema are only a handful, those like David Bordwell and Noel Carroll. We should quote here what Susan Sontag, an essayistic cultural and film critic said about academic interpretation: “Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.”

Film criticism, in being the product of cinephilia, is much closer to filmmaking than academic film study. I would not even call academic film study ‘film appreciation’ in the accepted sense, which implies cinephilia.

Lastly, I would be wary of using academic jargon – which is affiliated to disciplines like semiotics and psychology - in writing film criticism. If it is used, one should be very careful about what the terms mean and not for their glamour.

Having said these words, I thank FIPRESCI-India and the office bearers once again for having given me this opportunity.