

Beneath the surface: Cinematography and Time



The object of this article is to provoke debate on a basic cinematographic contradiction: a plethora of films across the world continues to fashion awe-inspiring cinematographic spaces (stunning visuals), however, only a few are able to realize a simultaneous and direct experience of cinematographic time. With the current epidemic of “special effects”, the awe-inspiring space has taken a turn for the worse- we appear headed for an immersion into an immaterial world.

As opposed to what has been presumed as the obvious (that space/time is an integrated vehicle that makes cinema move) space and time in cinema are separate entities, destructive of each other when one is absolutely privileged against the other; and often requiring a system of relay between them for the two to significantly come together.

A film unfolds in space but at the same time in time, too. It is, however, usual to think of cinema as a visual and not (also) an art in and of time, as a temporal art. The meaning and feeling in films centre on what is organized for the eyes and ears with what is seen and heard in a way that leads more to the production of space than to a realization of time. Time in such films is a thing just present there; intarsia entrenched available as a result of a progression of

events, as a consequence of, as something absent and only directly experienced. It is rarely present and directly experienced as a revelation of multiple durations conscious in the way it's found in music.

Obviously, cinema cannot aspire to the condition of music, which is primarily a temporal discipline. Cinema is an equal mix of movement and time. The question this debate hopes to raise is how movement and time have developed as independent elements in cinema and if they have sought a unique cinematographic resolution for every film.

How does cinematography figure precisely in this debate?

Movement (of the object being filmed or the camera itself) is in every respect a part of space. "Motion Picture" is nothing but a translation of spatial fragments that build an illusion of movement. Movement reinforces space- it is space. Temporal elements such as "rhythm" in a narrow and "attention" in a broad sense, only serves to impart specific shape to movement, they place movement in a time frame (for instance for a narrative). However, a movement that happens in a passage of time-does not necessarily ensure a simultaneous, unhindered experience of duration. On the contrary, camera is often a slave to "action" that develops narrative/non-narrative spaces and is rarely able to establish a life of its own- it will not, for instance, tilt or pan away by a logic of its own independent rhythm and attention in relation to the whole film. At the most camera movement is meant to enhance features of "actions" in the narrative. The paradox is: tied to the action the camera does not open the spatial field to an experience of time, freed from action the camera damages the narrative itself.

Most films do not encourage a direct awareness of the passage of time. Such awareness alienates the viewer from involvement with what may be characterized as the emotional depth of the field of a narrative. The distance forces the viewer to look at and reflect upon the mode of the narrative-for instance, if the film is made in melodramatic idiom the viewer will be forced to look at the melodramatic mode of narration. Obviously, for that moment of alienation, the melodramatic movement of the film will not carry the viewer away into melodramatic emotions. For a "regular" mainstream film this distinction can be a disaster but for films that attempt a wider cinematographic perspective it is indispensable. There are number of examples in both mainstream and independent cinema where the extraordinary use of technique of alienation has opened the audience to the "times" the films were exploring. It is this temporal alienation that makes films self-reflexive-precisely in the manner that a highly engaging theatrical performance becomes self-reflexive when the play, using (theatrical) alienation technique is suddenly seen as happening on the proscenium. The presence of alienation distances a narrative from its performance. In an ultimate sense, the way music is about music, theatre is about theatre, painting is about painting, and cinema is about cinema.

When nothing moves time does.

Again, we have a paradox: it is only when the object and the camera are immobile (without motion) that we make an entire contact with duration. An immobile apple on an immobile table, filmed by an immobile camera, offers an ideal situation for an experience of a passing of duration.

The material reality of life and cinema, is however, more complex than the ideal apple situation is able to illuminate. Experiments where the camera is held static upon an object for hours (refer to Warhol and others) will remain isolated as unrepeatable examples, but ones that prove the position of our thesis. It tells us what lengthy takes in certain films do: a visual, however visual will not sustain itself beyond the time required to “read” that visual. Beyond that read limit the visual stimulus embodied in the images is exhausted after which it makes the viewer conscious not of space visually organized bit of a time shorn of visually resulting into a certain bland saturation in the head. The films that use prolonged takes are in effect attempting to introduce a direct apprehension of time by “killing” the visual. It appears to be a painful route to discover and employ time in cinema, a kind of cinematographic bloodletting. Unfortunately, it’s a procedure that makes it “given”, because it equally robs the cinematic moment of its fleeting sensuousness. Lay and even enlightened audiences find such subjection to empty time unbearable- they wait for its termination or remain disconnected to the film.

Ironically, shorter durations appear to help maintain the visual illusion (and, therefore, the excitement) and prevent a sequence of visuals from being sucked into the formidable black hole of time. Unfortunately, short durations are only able to sustain a series of distractions rather than grow into a mature attention. This is precisely how the contemporary consumerist campaigns operate where playful distractions battle with eternal absence of the real substance, where the consumer shall never realize that ultimate object of consumption. Advertising signs continue to beckon the consumer on to an unreachable horizon. As virtual technology takes hold of cinematography to control and manipulate visuals on an “inhuman” scale we are set to enter into an age of dense, opaque and endless space.

The immobility of the object and the camera we spoke of in reality implies a state of neutrality between the two. In other words, if the camera and action of begins and objects retain (the intangible) neutrality despite their extensive/intensive dimensions, we should have a flow of duration seeping through an ellipsis between images and sounds. The word “neutral” may on one hand signify that which is not visually expressive, not sharply expressive and on the other hand also that which is expressive, even sharply expressive without hiding the fact of being so. Bresson described cinematographic image as empty or “ironed out”, drained of intention. Jean- Luc Godard and his cameraman Raoul Coutard on the other hand made their first film exuding breathless expressions but one that continuously carried out a police-convict chase in which nothing much happens.

In that case of Bresson the empty shot does contain a sequence of action corresponding to a narrative moment but these actions do not do more than make a mechanism for a particular shot, or what he called a “fragment”. A mechanism is a series of actions that non-actors go through following the fragmentation of the narrative development. Opposed to the technique of mise-en-scene where scene, scenery, set, setting and actor’s movement relate to a whole intentional environment(as in Eisenstein), Bresson ‘s single shot present itself as fragment(often with only hands, feet, door, faces, bodies, etc) of an intangible whole not displaying any particular intention. The players are required to perform these actions without an effort to interpret or impose content upon the mechanism. Bereft of “intention” (on the part of characters and the camera) the mechanism is not driven by facial or for those matter authentic psychological motivations. The mechanism itself contains no intention at all. It is the ellipsis between fragments, the difference between fragments which finally conveys a sense of intangible intentions. That difference becomes a specific relation between the two fragments when bridged in the head of a spectator. Not on the screen but in the head of the spectator making him or her subjectively active participant. Cinema itself then appears a hub of multiple intentions in conflict with each other like music.

However, even with non- actors and non-acting it is hard to go through a series of actions without a trace a personal incentive. Bresson, therefore, waited for an “accident” or an involuntary delivery of lines and gestures, for a moment that will happen by chance and not by design.

“The image must exclude the idea of image”

(Bresson)

Cinematographically speaking a cameraman can only contribute to a film that strives for cinematographic time if he treats the objective reality as a reality of sensation, rather than a visualization of verbal descriptions, worse, conceptions. Sensation is a preverbal condition of cognition and speaks of no intentionally. A sequence of sensations and the difference between them certainly leads to meanings and conceptions. It would be unthinkable for instance to light up a scene for Bresson where the angle position and quality of light contain a deliberate or sharp expression.

Bresson evolved the technique of “fragmentation” in order to discard the traditional method of “representation”. In a word, fragmentation meant the creation of unique fragments that produce meaning only upon juxtaposition whereas representation involved variations on the principle of mise-end-scene. Whereas a fragment does not stand for a meaning on its own but lights up on contact with another fragment, the mise-en-scene of any kind builds a master plan and details through an execution of certain known and verbalized intentions within the framework of a master shot. The only intention that is a decision to place every fragment in a definite position in a given sequence of fragments. For purposes of cinematography it would

mean that the image achieves an emptiness of a sensation through lightning and exposure, through contrast and diffusion.

The idea of the image is produced from the use of a pre-determined reading of the image, whereas an image, pure and simple, is one that is forming but not yet formed. For Bresson, just a fresh angle made things more visible than a whole lot of light and colour and sound and fury. Only neutral images were able to create the “irrational interval” on juxtaposition, transform the two to make the intangible ellipsis between them speak. Bresson’s image are radically different from “the rational interval of Hollywood and of Eisenstein’s dialectical montage”

Opposed to the popular conception that mainstream films must present graphic narratives in which the structure of events is fully and clearly explained and the broad premise of the film is firmly in place, there are innumerable examples of successful filmmakers who have dared to make the audience experience the mysteries of the uncertain, the unknown. Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* is one prime example of how the director repeatedly fought the temptation of succumbing to the compulsion of explaining the intention behind the central act of the film: the invasion by the birds

In a letter to Hunter (the screenwriter for *The Birds*) about his first draft (13 November 1961) Hitchcock writes, “I’m concerned whether anything of a thematic nature should go into the script. I’m sure we’re going to be asked again and again, especially by the morons ‘Why are we doing it’. And in a memo on the second draft (20 December 1961) he notes “People are still asking: Why do the birds do it?

It appears that there is till this day no definitive explanation as to why the birds in this famous Hitchcock film attacked the Bodega Bay community. Or even why they attacked the human beings at all? Whenever Hitchcock was offered explanations to authenticate the irrational bird assault, he was, in the end led to use his directorial eraser to wipe out every explanation, writes Krohn. Hitchcock deleted all explanations that the writers, the producers and he battled in earlier draft versions of the screenplay. These have been detailed in the book *Hitchcock at Work*.

Among others, these explanations were: a) a minor suggestion in the Du Maurier story that the Russians may have (during and because of the Cold War) poisoned the birds, was dropped on; b) that Castro (and enemies of America) might have launched a “bird revolution” persisted until the second draft of the screenplay, and carried lines like “Birds of the world untie”! You have nothing to lose but your feathers” was eventually struck out by Hitchcock in the third draft; c) the ornithologist, Mrs. Bundy’s claim that mankind insisted on making it difficult for life to exist on this planet and Melanie’s response, “ May be they are tired of being shot at and roasted in ovens”, was removed from the script at later stage; d) a scene in a church where a priest, moments before the first bird assault, quotes from the Ecclesiastes about vanity and

vexations of the mind in all things and that nothing would last was present in the original synopsis but never made it to even the first draft of the screenplay; e) the attack was a “natural thing” as the Da Maurier’s book briefly suggests, a blind instinct that raced through the whole species and took over the birds, was dropped after much debate.

The last word: “It appears that the bird attacks come in waves with long intervals between (either ‘in between’ or ‘between them’). The reason for this does not seem clear yet”, was the only explanation the director was able to muster.

The fact that Hitchcock refused to explain the “why” of the bird assault led to a film that courted a series of events that were suspended in a state of being uncertain, undecided and even doubtful. Such mysterious situations evoke anxiety and apprehension and prepare the audience for an experience of fearful suspense that naturally follows. The compositions of a frame and movement in and between shots are not enough to create a suspended emotional condition- it is the experience of a duration abnormally contracted or equally abnormally expanded relative to its routine existential/empirical experience, which makes attention suspend itself in time. The duration spans across shots as something continuously present, as a whole curve in time, made of intangible materiality yet emotionally palpable. In this respect it is revealing that Bill Krohn also explodes the myth that Hitchcock was a stickler for following the screenplay and executing storyboards into cinema. Through extensive documentation available on his films and through his collaboration Krohn is able to establish that Hitchcock was not the “control freak” he is made out to be; he never rigorously followed the pre-visualization techniques centring on the famous Hollywood storyboards ;more often than not scenes were still being written as he shot his films; he himself admitted that the first rule of making cinema was “ flexibility”; he never nailed down his cameraman to the storyboard drawings; and, that Hitchcock’s own claim of sticking to the script to the script and storyboards was a fashionable desire to protect an image of a perfectionist in Hollywood show business. Ironical as it may appear, the production company ordered a set of drawings to be traced from the production stills after the film was complete in all respects for the publicity of *North by Northwest*.

To a filmmaker like Hitchcock the storyboards would have been more useful in understanding the precise quality of juxtaposition between images and not in their visual power to conceptualize; the invisible inner path that rides the flow of duration and connects across shots to germinate a whole feeling, is the real source of creating tension in the unfolding of an event in a film.

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his books on cinema, *Movement- Image* and *Time- Image* was the first to discover Yasujiro Ozu (Japan) and Robert Bresson (France) as two modern filmmakers who explored the unknown realm of “time- image” in cinema. Cinema before World War II was, according to Deleuze, dominated by “movement-image”.

Not paradoxically Ozu's cinema finds its "time image through a denial of camera movement (of pan, tilt, zoom and later tracking) and an adoption of the static shot with the camera placed on the tatami. The camera lens faces characters from fixed angles and produced headlong or profiles or three-fourth views of face, torsos and bodies. The near symmetrical and, therefore, neutral frames are further marked by a clear (even if developing) geometry between colours and shapes, in the interiors and the exteriors. In terms of lighting Ozu's cameraman often creates a dark vignette around the frame (particularly for the interior scenes) where the visual surround (upper and lower regions of frame) shade off into darker tones. The result of this entire cinematographic regimen makes the actors movement gain a clear significance. The direction and the velocity of these movements, in characters an extraordinary humanity. Apparently, at the shooting script stages of a film's production, Ozu often emphasized directions where he drew arrows at angles in which characters moved and interacted with each other.

Seeking a semblance of nature in cinematography making space "natural" does not reveal the nature of space we have in mind for the film. It indeed remains a mere semblance of nature rather than an unfolding of nature itself. Like natural acting, natural photography too appears rehearsed but at the same time posturing as unrehearsed and spontaneous. There are reasons to fear a future where galloping virtual possibilities of image-manipulation begin to posture as natural, as nature.

Source Material: Indian Horizons, Magazine, March 2008. Mani Kaul is one of the greatest Indian cineastes alive and working in India. This essay is reproduced here so that people are aware with his ideas on cinema. Hence, in time to come we can introduce his films to a new generation of audience, with an eventual Issue on his works and cinema.