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ASIAN CINEMA: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

RASHMI DORAISWAMY

PART 1.
REMEMBRANCE OF THE DECADE PAST

The Festival Circuit
Continents, history tells us, are meant to be 'discovered'. They begin to exist only when the eye of the other gazes on them. Self-perception in a mirror can be fascinating, but it is the look of another that ignites new energies. The very title 'Festival of Three Continents' of the Nantes Film Festival, for instance, manifests this desire not to see oneself but to explore the other.

International festivals, alas, still remain the main forum for cinephiles to view cinemas from other countries. The proliferation of festivals in Europe led to fierce competitiveness in discovering cinemas. African and Latin American cinema had been 'discovered' in the seventies and Asia was really the unexplored continent. Suddenly cultural Colombuses discovered that for every Satyajit Ray, in almost every other Asian country, there was an unknown genius like Ritwik Ghatak.

1985 was a landmark year, and the second half of the 80s the watershed period for this excitement over Asian cinema. In 1985 Chen Kaige’s Yellow Earth created a furore on the international festival scene with its poetic and political images. It heralded the Fifth Generation of filmmakers from China and aroused a new interest in Asian cinema. Prior to this, of all the Asian cinemas, it was Indian cinema and Japanese cinema that were known internationally. Even so Satyajit Ray and Kurosawa were known more as individual masters rather than as representatives of a vibrant national cinema. This was to change in the second half of the eighties with new names. In 1989 in
Locarno, for the first time in any international festival, all the major awards were won by Asians: The Golden Leopard went to South Korea's lone ranger, Bae Yong Kyun's *Why has Bodhidharma Left for the East?*; the Silver to Shaji Karun's *The Birth* from India and the Bronze to Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home?*

Hong Kong's New Wave, the Filipino independents, the Fifth and Sixth Generations from China, the epical Taiwanese cinema and the metaphoric and deceptively simple Iranian cinema... there was no dearth of cinemas. Even newly independent countries, like Vietnam and Bangladesh, had their own special kind of political cinema.

There is no doubt that this limelight gave a new impetus, for better or for worse, to these cinemas. For some filmmakers awards and international recognition meant more prestige at home and greater access to production money from home and abroad; for others, it meant closer political censorship and obstacles in making the next film; and for many others, it meant having arrived at a 'formula' for success that could be repeated over again.

Once the first phase of discovery was over there began the focus on the other kinds of Asian cinema. The auteurs of the commercial cinema like Guru Dutt and Mani Ratnam from India had tributes paid to them at various festivals.

It was hardly surprising that a decade later, the Asian wave was on the wane. When the centenary of cinema was celebrated in Europe, in most international festivals, barring a few, the focus was back on the West, with few Asians being remembered. But as the Turkish critic Mehmet Basutcu observes: "It must be remembered that cinema is a fabulous voyage and that western cinephiles, just as tourists from these strong currency countries, adore all that is exotic. And they have the means to undertake these dream journeys. It is so natural, so human that you can hardly bring yourself to be critical." (1)
But this did not really matter any more. Most countries in the region now have their own festival. There are also special festivals like international children's film festival as in India and Iran or others that showcase documentaries and video films as the Yamagata and Mumbai Film Festivals do. Many of the new festivals either focus entirely on Asian cinema or have special sections on this cinema. Hong Kong was a leader in this respect. It had an Asian Cinema section in addition to the World Cinema section which focused on the most significant works of the year gone by. It also mounted some of the finest sections on its own cinema: the different varieties of the Martial Arts cinema, or the Cantonese and Mandarin cinemas with impressive informative and analytical catalogues to supplement them. Several new Asian festivals came up or were consolidated. As examples one can refer to the Pusan Film Festival which is two editions old and has special sections on Asian films and the Singapore Film Festival has an award for the best Asian film. Fukuoka was set up as an exclusively Asian festival. Apart from this there are the regional festivals of the ASEAN and SAARC countries.

PART 2
THE SITUATION TODAY

New Trends in Commercial Cinemas
What about the Asian cinemas themselves? The popular films distributed by the commercial circuit whether in Hong Kong or in India have pan-regional audiences. Hong Kong films likewise have a large market in the south-east Asian region. Indian commercial films reach out to West Asia, Russia and Africa. Added to this is the neo-patriotism of the emigre Indian audiences in Europe and America, a relatively recent phenomenon. The success of the 1996 Indian film Dilwale Duhhaniya Le Jaayenge (The Heart Will Win the Bride) abroad, for instance, is to be seen in this light. In this film the heroine from London, a second generation non-resident Indian, is shown as being more conservative
and obedient to a patriarchal order than heroines in any run of the mill Hindi commercial film, who at least put up a token protest, if not openly rebel when it comes to matters of the heart. Cashing in on this, other films are being made tapping this very same emigre audience, the most recent one being _Pardes_ (A Land Not One’s Own).

Hong Kong directors are now making it big in Hollywood. John Woo has hit big time with his third film in Hollywood _Face-Off_. Kirk Wong too has gone west. Shekhar Kapur from India has made a big-budget film on Queen Elizabeth for the British production company Working Title that has produced _Dead Man Walking_ and _Four Weddings and a Funeral_. This movement of directors going to the west and working on their own terms, on not just ‘asian’ themes and bringing their own stamp and signature to the other environment is a new phenomenon. Even if they are exceptions, there are several points of interest. John Woo has almost achieved a cult status for his conception of action and has been projected as a path-breaking action director despite the two lukewarm films before _Face-Off_ that he did for Hollywood. That a filmmaker from a formerly colonised country should be asked to make a film on no less a person than one of the Queens of England again points to a new set of relationships between ‘equals’ in a decolonised framework. These may viewed as innovative marketing strategies, but the fact that these Asian directors are considered to be ‘marketable’ at all is itself of significance.

There are other interesting developments happening in the commercial industries. There are many filmmakers who are working with commercially established genres but subverting them innovatively. There is a new self-consciousness and playfulness in this effort, unlike earlier auteurs of the commercial cinema who, more often than not, worked in studio-systems and were only later canonised as original filmmakers. Takeshi Kitano from Japan is the foremost example of this kind of cinema. He has, in a series of films, that include his latest,
Hana-Bl, given a new twist to the cop and gangster story. In India a young director, Rajat Kapur, has recently made a thriller with a twist in his first film, *Private Detective*.

**New Waves Anew**

In countries where there is a split between the commercial and the parallel cinema, as there is in India, the 'other' cinema is being hit by lack of funds and the lack of a distribution system. Many films do not get to see the light of a projection lamp. In India, for instance, the state-run National Film Development Corporation gives about Rs 25 to 35 lakhs for a film, whose script is approved. This is pittance compared to the multi-crore budgets of any run-of-the-mill commercial film. Many young filmmakers make films on shoe-string budgets. Last year Leslie Caravalho made his first feature, *The Outhouse*, on the Anglo-Indian community in Bangalore with personal funds that amounted to Rs 15 lakhs (US$ 37500 approx.). The actors and cameraman had to rehearse the scenes well before shooting because the budget did not allow retakes! And yet, despite all odds, films are being made in India. Last year the most significant films were all adaptations of literary works ranging from Shakespeare to regional Indian literature. There is now interesting work in video also being done in India, which has developed from documentation of social issues to more introspective works that include genres like the poetic essay. Amar Kanwar’s *A Season Outside*, on violence and non-violence and Jayashankar and Anjali Monteiro’s *YCP '97* on the mental and physical confines of the prison, belong here. In other countries, like Sri Lanka, release and distribution for every film made is assured, unlike in India. But there is a long queue and a long wait and a director has often moved on to his next film and completed it while the first one still awaits release!

In South Korea, last year, there was a spate of low-budget films by young directors, including Hong Sang-Soo’s *The Day The Pig Fell into the Well* that did well at international film festivals. But the problems in
the country remain the same: low finances do not allow for stars to be taken and subsequently the absence of stars does not guarantee distribution. Corporate investment, too, comes with strings attached. Samsung and Daewoo, who had started investing money in Korean films, are now re-thinking their policies. Samsung, for instance, has gone into international productions and invested in Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai's films including *Happy Together* which did very well internationally.

Coproductions have, in fact become a fact of filmmaking. Many production agencies like NHK in Japan are actively involved in producing films from other countries like India and Sri Lanka. Some directors benefit from having bigger budgets in realising their aesthetic visions; others tend to give in to easy solutions, in terms of what would appeal to the coproducing partners.

Censorship remains another major problem that filmmakers face in Asian countries. Even this has been used to advantage, to formulate a new aesthetics and vision of cinema as an art-form. The Iranian cinema, for instance, has made a mark with its children's films that speak to adults as well as children. The narrative, as it were, unfolds on two levels simultaneously, without the message of community living becoming didactic, or losing out on poetic simplicity. Chinese cinema, on other hand, in many of its films in the last few years has explored issues of sexuality as a metaphor for power, politics, the terror of tradition, conformism, repression and the defiance of the human spirit.

PART 3
THE WAY AHEAD

New Technologies
The advent of digital cinema has raised some fundamental questions about the very nature of cinema as a recording art-form. From the
feather fluttering in the wind in *Forest Gump* to all those aliens and natural and man-made disasters, Hollywood narratives have come to increasingly rely on digitalisation and special effects which have given birth to “a new kind of realism, which can be described as ‘something which is intended to look exactly as if it could have happened, although it really could not’” (2). This technology has also resulted in bringing animated musicals like *Lion King*, *Alladin* and *Hercules* to the big screen. While the technology is astounding and breathtaking, the narratives remain in the main, formula and stereotype ridden and catastrophe-oriented. There is also the tendency to reduce the complexity of narratives from other cultures, like *Alladin* or *Hercules*, to the standard Hollywood format.

Asian cinema has much to offer in this context. Jean Michel Frodon puts it very dramatically: “In Asia, almost exclusively nowadays, one finds cineastes capable of the original cinematic geste (from which, at present, their Western colleagues are cut off, like a Paradise lost).... Who would take Abbas Kiarostami, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Shaji Karun, Youssouf Chahine or Wong Kar-Wai for innocent? But however cultured they may be (and they are), however aware of theoretical and political abysses being opened up in the process of representation in the cinema (and they are)... they find at the moment of filming, this ‘original’ attitude of cinema as if in its dawn”. (3)

If the auteur cinema from Asia has this ‘original geste’, the commercial cinema, too has something to offer. As Chris Doyle, ace cinematographer says: “I think the reason for the difference between Jackie Chan’s films and Arnold Schwarzenegger’s films is that you have a great complicity with the person - which is very Asian. You know Jackie is actually in danger because it is not a special effects film....Whatever happens visually usually happens in the camera - as in the films of Wong Kar-Wai. ... You feel closer to the person because you are closer, you are not separated by digital effects and stuff like that.” (4)
The new technologies, linked inextricably as they are, as of now, to a certain kind of cinema, also tend to canonise given ways of seeing. Even if digital cinema can better reality and its recording by the camera and offer for our perception worlds that do not exist, the question still remains of whether it can produce or sustain a genius like Ozu with his very individual style of framing, cutting and continuity, or a master like Ritwik Ghatak, who worked with the excesses of melody and drama.

One of the main themes of Asian cinema, from Iran to Sri Lanka to China, is the conflict between tradition and modernity. This conflict is also specifically embedded in the passage from a rural agrarian economy to the industrial one. Tradition may lose out in this conflict but it is almost always cast in a heroic mode. There is also a deep link between these narratives and cultural formations like religion. The new technologies that offer us robots and mutants, sinking ships and flying machines as if they actually exist in three-dimensional space, would be hard put to sensuously capture these very real experiences of lives in historical transition.

This is not to say that there are no post-modern narratives in Asia. Wong Kar-Wai’s films, for instance, belong to a sensibility that can only be termed ‘post-MTV’. Rarely in recent times has the despair and alienation of de-classed, de-spaced, de-contextualised, de-cultured diasporic beings in the last lap of the 20th century, been captured as it has been in Happy Together. The images and narrative have a strange sense of being ‘evacuated’, pointing to a new, precarious form of cinema.

**The Need to Collaborate**

The countries of Asia are bound by a common history, of colonisation and decolonisation in the main. Yet there is also greater heterogeneity of politics and cultures within and without the boundaries of nations leading to friction and conflict. The time has come for Asia to think of itself as a union, as the European nations now do. Asia still has the
audiences for films, because traditional art-forms that demand community participation are still a living force in this continent. Commercial films, in all countries, instinctively sense and tap this desire to congregate and this need to have the social experience of watching a film with family and friends, through their melodramas.

Finances and distribution are the pan-Asian problems that filmmakers face. The solution seems to lie in the tapping of domestic and overseas markets, the setting up of alternate distribution networks, and smaller theatres and multiplexes for serious cinema. Active state intervention is required to nurture national cinemas. This is all the more necessary given the inroads that Hollywood has made into our markets. There is need for enlightened producers, and production companies; funds like the Hubert Bals fund in Rotterdam to support script development and realisation of projects. The Pusan Promotion Plan is an important step in this direction. There is need for greater collaboration in the Asian region to set up archives and share the technical know-how of archiving; the need to set up film institutes, and promote regular exchange of scholars and teachers; there is a need to set up awards for excellence in the various fields of filmmaking; and of course, there is the need to share and collaborate with regard to technical facilities and know-how.

The new information technologies and globalisation have brought the world closer. We find this reflected in the field of cinema too, where there a great deal of mobility. A cinematographer like Doyle works in Hong Kong, China and Korea; Wong Kar-Wai goes off to Argentina to create a Hong Kong of the mind there; Prasanna Vithanage finds funds for his film in Japan, Asian filmmakers carve a niche for themselves in the West, Abbas Kiarostami has an Arts and Essais theatre named after him in Paris.... All this points to a fertile ground for collaborations and cooperation that can be widened and built upon in the years to come.
Notes
1. 'Asia, No More In Fashion', Mehmet Basutcu, Cinemaya 33, 1996, p.64
2. 'What is Digital Cinema?', Lev Manovich, Blimp 37, 1997, p. 33
3. 'In the East, Eden', Jean Michel Frodon, Cinemaya 38, 1997, p.64
4. 'The Heart of the Matter', Chris Doyle interviewed by Aruna Vasudev, Cinemaya 38, 1997, p. 28