

Reflected readings In Available Light:

Masters of Light, Servants of Shadow

Reflections on the History and Practice of Cinematography in India

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CLIP 1 – from *Madhumati*

(Shortly after the opening of the film- Dilip Kumar and his companion enter a derelict mansion)

A door opens on what is obviously a stormy night, and a man with a lantern, perhaps a servant in a ruined mansion, illuminates the way in for two strangers, sheltering from the rain. I like to think of this scene, of the act of holding up the light, of the casting of shadows, of the moving and playing of hide and seek in and out of darkness and light, and of the obvious tensions between visibility and invisibility, as a metaphor for the circumstances of the lives and conditions of labour of those who work to create images, with their eyes, their minds, their hands and with those incredibly cruel and complex machines called cameras, lenses, lights, cutter stands, filters, printers and developers. To think about these lives and these circumstances is to make reflected readings in available light.

The heat, the fatigue and the stench of a studio, a location or a laboratory are always obscured by the magic lantern of the cinema. It will be my effort in the next twenty minutes or so to nudge you in the direction of the labour

in the shadows. To speak to you of the servants who come in from the shadows with the light, who are sometimes perhaps ironically called 'masters of light. I like to think of the servant with the lantern as an old forgotten cameraman, the strangers as us, the audience, and of the abandoned mansion with its missing pictures and portraits – as the decaying edifice of cinema history.

The clip you have just seen is a bad video rendition of a one of the early scenes from a black and white classic from the early nineteen fifties cinema culture that flourished in a city once known as Bombay. The people who worked on the making of this image are significant for a variety of reasons. The film is *Madhumati*. Screenplay by a young Ritwik Ghatak, later to become the troubled signature of epic melodrama in Calcutta, and responsible for some of the most arresting image making in the history of cinema in India. The direction is by Bimal Roy, pioneering cameraman with the new theatres in Calcutta, and later director, and the cameraman is Dilip Gupta. One of the great survivors of the vicissitudes of the history of cinema in India.

The only time that I have met Dilip Gupta was not far from his ninetieth birthday, in the summer of 1997 in a small apartment in suburban Mumbai, in the course of a series of interviews with cinematographers that my colleagues, Jeebesh Bagchi and Monica Narula of the Raqs Media Collective, Delhi and C.K. Muralidharan, of the Cinematographers Combine, Bombay did while working on our research project on the "History and Practice of Cinematography in India" with a grant from the India Foundation of Arts. This project is now at its closure, and in the last four years the story that we have unearthed through more than twenty interviews with veteran and working cinematographers is one of amnesia and delayed remembrance, of fading prints and damaged negatives, of archives that collect absences, of a sudden rush to buy the television rights to old classics

when it became clear that the monster of television needed to feed off retro chic and nostalgia, of cameramen who created images of astounding beauty and were forgotten when it came to authorial recognition and of ritual obeisance to the hoary tradition of Indian cinema coupled with a studied neglect of the living history of practitioners and technicians.

Let us take the case of Dilip Gupta himself, who began his career as a cameraman in 1927 in silent cinema. Lived, worked and trained in Hollywood, worked for long on trick films at Walt Disney studios and then came back to India to join a burgeoning cinema industry. In the 1920s and 30s to talk about Bombay or even Hindi Cinema is premature, the production base of Cinema is pan-sub continental with studios creating work for a south Asian as well as a larger central Asian, east Asian, African and Caribbean market. Cinema in India has had a global reach and market form its very inception. This diversity of markets and audiences is echoed in a cosmopolitan workforce, with cameramen, technicians, actors and actresses and directors from All over undivided India (but with a preponderance of Bengalis, Punjabis, Parsis, Tamils, Maharashtrians and Malyalis) but also from parts of Iran, Sri Lanka, Burma, Germany, Italy, Britain and America – all working in a transient migratory mass between the major production centres of Calcutta, Bombay, Pune and Lahore. Particularly in Cinematography, German and American technicians (say Walter Wirshcing, Emil Schunnemann or Marcus Bartley) continued to have a significant presence in Bombay cinema and Madras Cinema till the mid to late fifties. The early history of Indian cinema is full of, shall we say “Border Crossings” which brought especially, amongst technicians diverse currents in then contemporary cinema culture into intimate contact. The next clip that I am going to show you, again from *Madhumati* is perhaps significant of the hybrid influences of the film noir genre,

by way of German expressionism that resulted in the dark almost gothic feel of his cinematography in this sequence of *Madhumati*.

CLIP 2 – from *Madhumati*

(Dilip Kumar explores the mansion in candle light)

Notice here, the attention paid to the mise en scene, the almost luxurious indulgence of candlelight. The rich black and white tones and the play with light itself. To achieve this candle light effect, to almost risk near darkness on the emulsion of the film, was not an easy task in the early nineteen fifties in India. Dilip Gupta would recount with boyish glee the delight of daring to use a practical (an actual light source) on the person of an actor. He had taken the candle stand and wired the actor 'Dilip Kumar' so that in certain key shots the actual electrical bulb concealed in the housing of the candle stand would throw an adequately candle like penumbra of light as Dilip Kumar moved about. Tremendous control with cutters and reflectors was necessary in a scene like this to avoid a multiplicity of shadows and yet manage to evoke a candle lit feeling. Yet what someone like Dilip Gupta had as an asset was the liberty and creative freedom of the heyday of silent cinema. A time when location shooting, exposures taken with low or ambient light where able to create and suggest extremely evocative cinematic possibilities. The coming of sound, like later the coming of colour, was at first a handicap, forcing the cameras back into studios, altering and restricting framing to a dull frontality so as to achieve sync sound recoding.

Yet by the time *Madhumati* is made, dubbing is viable and well established, liberating cameras and actors to move and the frame becomes once more a dynamic entity, repositioning mise en scene and film stock in black and white has again developed considerable exposure latitude, which is to say that it

now allows for a fair bit of contrast in the tonal range. This was beginning to be exploited by people like Dilip Gupta (who could return to a silent film expressionist aesthetic) and as we shall see, in the next two clips, by Guru Dutt's cameraman V.K. Murthy. Murthy saheb is – perhaps the most remarkable cameraman of his generation working in Bombay at that time. V.K. Murthy whose active mind continues to be a neglected archive of film history was a teenage runaway who came to Bombay to become a hero (a recurrent motif in Cameramen's personal biographies) and ended up being a studio hand, by sheer accident became a student at a polytechnic that happened to offer courses in cinematography along with plumbing, carpentry and cobblery, returned to work as an orchestral violinist at a Bombay studio and accidentally solves a minor technical flaw in camera loading that was vexing a group of senior assistant cinematographers.

The director of photography in that film, noticed what looked like original acumen, but which Murthy himself says was simple mechanical training from the Polytechnic days, and Murthy is taken on as an assistant. He gradually learns to work in the extremely segregated, hierarchical almost caste-ist atmosphere of the studio. The varying degrees of those who could touch which part of the camera, lens or filters being a case in the politics of untouchability of paranoiac proportions. And of constantly struggling to access rudimentary pieces of information like the aperture setting for a given shot. Let me say this in Murthy's own words – from his interview –

"I remember that in the early days as an assistant, the very simple fact of which exposure setting we could use for a given light situation in any shot was shrouded in mystery. Cameramen would always, rotate the aperture setting ring away from the correct position after a shot, so that their assistants would never

know. These were the days when most assistants were untrained apprentices, and all that lay between an apprentice and his master was the mystery of the f stop number”

He goes on to talk about how a famous cameraman had humiliated him or coming too close to the camera...and how in an ironic and perverse play of destiny, the same cameraman had to once beg him for work, when Murty was an established professional and the one time master a man past his prime...

It was in these unlikely circumstances that a man like V.K, Murthy could work his way into the attention of a young debutante film director – Guru Dutt, both Guru Dutt and Murty represented that liminal world of transients who found the film industry an ideal refuge for their talents and personalities. Neither had formal education, nor much by the way of artistic experience, yet this pair went on to make some of the most arresting images in Indian cinema. The excerpt I am now going to show you is from *Kagaz ke Phool*. or “Paper Flowers” and I really enjoy this film because it is a film about film making itself and bestows lavish attention to the paraphernalia of a film set.

CLIP 3 – Film Set – *Kagaz ke Phool*

(Waheeda Rehman accidentally walks into the film set while shooting is on)

This is the scene where the heroine played by Waheeda Rehman, accidentally walks into a film set and is captured on film. Guru Dutt is the moustachioed man sitting next to the camera on the crane and the cameraman is played by V Ratra, who was Guru Datt’s earlier cameraman. Playing the part of the assistant, a slim, bespectacled man is V.K. Murty himself. Incidentally Murty did act as Ratra’s assistant on *Baazi* and a couple of earlier Guru Dutt films that

were produced under the Navketan Studios banner, Dev Anand vehicles directed by Chetan Anand.

Notice here, the elaborate staging of crane shots, with heavy duty Mitchell Cameras. And the quite rare attention to the ambience of the shoot itself. Murty fondly recalls *Kaagaz ke Phool* as Guru Dutt's gift to his craft and skill. By being the first cinemascope film it was a definite technical challenge, and the nature of the narrative itself demanded a constant tussle with light in all its aspects.

CLIP 4: MIRROR SUNBEAM SEQUENCE *Kagaz ke Phool*

(Waheeda Rehman and Guru Dutt meet on the studio floor, in the light of a huge sunbeam)

Let me quote here again from an interview with V.K. Murthy where he talks about this scene:

"After the shooting we used to sit together and talk in the afternoon in Mahboob Studios. Sunlight used to come down through the exhaust fan high above, close to the ceiling. All the dust in the studio would catch as motes in that shaft of light. I said to Guru Dutt - isn't it beautiful. He said could you do this? I said I'll try and at that the time idea I had was to focus a giant spot light which was available at Shantaram's studio, this had a problem though, the highlight used to come but it was divergent light not parallel wave, I got that, but was not satisfied. One day I was sitting outside in the sun, one makeup man was playing with a mirror, chasing reflections on a wall. I saw that and thought Damn it, that's what I need, not a spot light. So I got the carpentry department to make two big mirrors, some four feet tall. Placed them outside the studio and had sunlight

strike on them at such an angle that it would hit the exhaust fan from the outside, then another big mirror was placed on the catwalk in side the studio, and that would direct the shaft of light in a diagonal pattern straight across the studio, So we got sunlight not on location, but inside; the studio floor. It was quite something, na. Till then nobody had used sunlight inside the studio not even in Hollywood films..”

What combination of circumstances made this moment of cinema possible? I do not think the explanation can be sought in terms of the creative geniuses of Guru Dutt or V.K. Murty.

Firstly, there is the fact of sitting after a days work and chatting and watching the light play in the afternoon. Something that could only be possible between two people who were full time employees in an old-fashioned film studio.

Secondly there was the possibility of trying things out, and of legitimate dissatisfaction with the results – not something that you can do in a film that needs to be canned in less time than it takes to do clap a clapperboard.

Thirdly there is the existence of a regular carpentry department and artisans with a relationship of trust with each other, who make not only big made to order mirrors if need be but also go on to make later, parabolic reflectors, from Murty’s design (something he later finds patented, advertised and sold on the pages of the American Cinematographer magazine).

All these were possible in a regime where films were made out of studios by a team of collaborators. Where actors, directors, technicians and

production staff were part of an integrated unit, know one another and had a modicum of respect for each other's professional skills and had the time to spend with each other on a regular basis. As the studio system collapsed and films became vehicles for stars, the importance of the team diminished. A cameraman's worth became measured by whether or not he could enhance a top heroines profile, not by his innate skill or willingness to work with others to create a new kind of image. Of course along with this came new slow speed colour film, which initially had low exposure latitudes, poor contrast ratios, and forced a retreat back to conventional lighting and framing, just as a two decades earlier, sound had forced another retreat in the development of the visual possibilities of cinema.

Films from the early sixties onwards had a dull, plastic, disembodied look. Guru Dutt virtually killed himself – just as is persona had done in *Kaagaz ke Phool* and Murty was left – without Guru Dutt films or Guru Dutt himself to provide a scaffold for his creativity. In his advancing years, he became an efficient cameraman of lacklustre films, that neither had the intense luminosity nor the rich darkness of the best films of the nineteen fifties.

A brief new shimmer of light came when Satyajit Ray's pioneering cameraman Subroto Mitra came to Bombay, first to work with Merchant Ivory films and then to make the stunningly beautiful pastoral Raj Kapoor - Waheeda Rehman starrer – *Teesri Kasam*. Mitra used his bounced lighting technique, perfected during his years with Ray, to great effect to create a soft gentle even sunlit feel, that was lyrical in its evocation of afternoons, of the soft light of lanterns in fairgrounds and campfires, of dappled sunlight on a bullock cart. I could find no satisfactory print of this film, and in deference to the urging of Suborto Mitra never to show a bad copy of any of is films I have to defer my

showing of a clipping to you But if you ever get a chance to see this film, do, because it does things with mid afternoon light in north India that I have never seen since.

But Suboroto Mitra, whom Nestor Almendros, an cameraman whose name some of you may be familiar with, considered as his personal master, could not survive Bombay, and had to return to a virtual exile from film making in Calcutta. He was considered too slow, too finicky in his insistence that the lighting be perfect. No one ever dared complain if a star delayed shooting by never turning up on set, but a cameraman who takes a little longer to light was simply unwilling to be tolerated by the industry in Bombay. Drab, flat film, followed drab flat film.

For a film industry that is so obsessed with itself and which is so productive, it is quite surprising how few films reflect back, even if in passing, on film making itself. I can count a handful, a pedagogic one reeler by Phalke on film making itself, *Manus* (by Shantaram from the thirties – which shows a film set), *Kaagaz ke Phool*, (1950s), Satyajit Ray's *Nayak* (peripherally), Ismail Merchant's *Bombay Talkies*, Shyam Benegal's *Bhoomika*, *Rajnigandha*, *Guddi*, (1970s) and more recently *Rangeela* and *Zubeida*. Compare this to the number of films on aspiring singers or dancers and which feature either recording studios or dance halls and you will realize what I mean by the fact that there is a clear logic of actually rendering the process of making films invisible. Technology, technicians, light boys, these are things that take away from the magic of the movies and so must be kept hidden as far as possible. *Kaagaz ke Phool*, in tracing the travails of a filmmaker and his refusal to compromise on the integrity of his craft can be read also as a story of the pressures that bear on the image

making process, a predicament that was particularly familiar to V. K. Murty and to Subrata Mitra.

Having happily passed over the entire decade of the sixties and seventies, which to my mind were cinematographically insignificant as far as the mainstream commercial film industry was concerned, (but which did produce the maverick personality of KK Mahajan, experimental cameraman of the Indian new wave, especially Mrinal Sen and Kumar Shahani and somewhat conservative cameraman for the middle of the road Bombay social.) I now proceed to the eighties, and to the revitalization of colour cinematography due to availability of faster film stock in larger quantities – especially as a result of the loosening of import restrictions on film stock.

Ashok Mehta, a cameraman whose life story in Bombay began again as a runaway teenager, and encompassed everything from someone who sold boiled eggs on the street to a canteen boy in a film studio to a light boy and finally to one of the most respected cameramen working today was one of the cameramen who returned to a spirit of play in light and darkness in mainstream Hindi film, and in colour. The next clipping, a very poor copy of a sumptuously photographed film might give you some indication of what this was all about.

CLIP 5 – *Utsav*

(Rekha enters Shekhar Suman's house, song and the taking off of Rekha's jewellery)

Notice again the usage of candlelight. Reminiscent of what Dilip Gupta was trying to achieve in the nineteen fifties. Notice also how, the camera by now has a clearly defined position as the revealing agent of the beauty of the star.

Ashok Mehta became a master at glamorising the women of the Indian cinema, and nothing perhaps suggest this more than this song which actually follows a progression from relative darkness to very bright light.

CLIP 6 - (*Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai Song– Khalnayak*)

Here, of course Ashok Mehta has stopped playing any games with visibility. He has become the slave of light. Of bright iridescent rainbow coloured luminosity that smacks us straight in the eye. The amount of light in kilowattage to make that scene happen, is perhaps the daily output of a small power plant. Even the drums have lights in them. This explosion of illumination is the hallmark of today's Hindi cinema, a reflection in perverse ways both of bad projection facilities in most cinema halls as well as the dependence of cinema on the glowing cube of the television set. The brighter the colour the longer the finger stays away from the remote button.

I am deliberately showing you a great deal of excerpts from song sequences, because I think that the song and dance sequence is the one space within the body of a film where a cinematographer gets to call the shots. The lavish costumes, the increasingly exotic locales and the presence of a huge production infrastructure makes the song sequence the cinematographer's special domain – a space where he knows dazzle is called for.

A new aesthetic, filtered via music television entered the Hindi cinema in the early to mid nineties. After years of being in the shadows, cameramen became in demand again, they started to command huge fees, became near stars, their names now began being printed on cinema posters. Although this trend began in the south, especially with cameramen like P. C. Sriram – who shot

quite a few early Mani Ratnam films, it rapidly spread to Mumbai and charismatic personalities like Ashok Mehta and their almost miraculous life histories contributed to the new iconic stature of the cinematographer.

As Anil Mehta, a younger cameraman who represents the new generation of film institute trained cinematographers who were once looked down upon as difficult but are now sought after as efficient light-master said of the changing look and feel of the Hindi film –

“Films have started to look more and more like products or advertisements. It is something that people are consciously trying to do; one would be lying if one were not to say that. Because of the spread of television the advertising industry has grown tremendously in size and so have the kind of budgets to make the films. A lot of talent has also gone into the advertising world. But, there are also a lot of international references, and this has brought about a visual qualitative shift. Kids now say, “I love to watch advertisement films”, which is a huge thing to say.

The mainstream Hindi film industry had a very strong visual style right up to the sixties, where the visual quality was influenced by European and Russian films. In the seventies, however, this changed completely! Prakash Mehra and Yash Chopra – their films looked fairly shoddy. I think this had to do with the Amitabh Bachan icon. His presence was enough in the film! I think some of the shoddiest films in Indian cinema history were made around him. Later, with the advertising boom, visual quality began to be an issue again.

But this meant that all the attention went into the mounting of the films. The same story could have been told in a much smaller house with much fewer

cost and less fabric, but no that wont do. But this mounting factor is a huge thing in the industry. Its a huge thing to an extent that it makes your film sell or not sell and forces everything to be more lavish and colourful. Light becomes a commodity. Colour becomes a commodity, Volume becomes a commodity. Something to be consumed almost instantly. So the more lavish and more colourful, the better it is. See that is what makes all the films look the same now again, with varying degrees of skill, that is all.”

Let me show you what Anil Mehta means by this.

CLIP 6 – (*Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam - Dhol Baaje Song*)

For this song sequence Anil Mehta mounted an acrylic platform some distance above the studio floor and rigged battery of lights totalling 75 Kilowatts mounted on long rods. The lighting set up for the floor alone had its own generator and its own main cable. The light was bounced onto the pit, which was painted white and then it shone, reflected through the acrylic sheets on to the bodies of the dancers, from below, without casting shadows. As if the whole floor was glowing. It grew very hot and a blower had to be kept in place and a midget positioned within this contraption so that he could change bulbs at will while the takes were being canned. .

Imagine being a midget surrounded by 75 kilowatts and having dancers stamping overhead while you sit cramped under a false floorboard, changing lamps, always millimetres away from electrocution.

Clifford Geertz, in an altogether different context had once remarked, and perhaps I am paraphrasing this somewhat inexactly, but you will get the gist

of what I mean ... so, then the atelier of the cameraman, that messy studio floor with its cabling, its scaffolds, its grease, its heavy machinery and its nightmarish production schedule is one that the film historian and film theorist of Indian cinema have by and large never stepped into. The tools of their understanding, far removed from the concrete realities of the industrial production apparatus of the cinema are forged in the parlours of abstracted narrative analysis and an a-historical aestheticism that has more to do with folkloristics than it has to do with film studies. Perhaps this is the burden of coming from an overstated, hyper-glamourised, sexy, film culture, who wants to talk about work, labour, production, machines, technology, power and knowledge when we can do a little detour into the semiotics of the navel twitch in a song sequence.

To think, or to write about writing with light is at all times to attempt a clumsy transposition of voices and registers. What I have tried to do is to cross the borders between aesthetics and a material understanding of the work process of an industrial scale. I doubt if one can work in this case without at least a glimmer of the other.