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A MATTER OF CRAFT

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These days when we discuss an art form, we tend to forget for some inexplicable reason the very components that make it what it is. The craft that enables an artist to express him/herself through a medium seems to be regarded as a necessary evil rather than an absolute precondition. It is a malaise that has overtaken the Arts particularly the cinema. We have now, for our benefit, the so-called cineastes who discuss what the great Kenji Mizoguchi called 'the Flickers' from every conceivable viewpoint, be it sociological, historical, psychological, philosophical or even psychiatric; every thing, that is, except the cinematic! Given this strange situation directors like Mani Kaul suffer, despite their continuous mastery of film language and signal contribution to it, because critics are blind to their essential cinematic qualities and stick all sorts of labels including that of being metaphysical onto the outward layers of their work

because of their narrative methods that only appear to be, but certainly are not, mystifying.

Kaul's greatest strength has been his lensing, his ability to translate with fidelity the vision seen in the mind's eye into a vivid cinematic image. His brilliance in this area first became apparent in a student film *Shraddha*, the name of the wife in the work made at the Film Institute of India thirty years ago. In this short, simple tale of a middle-class young man

Murad Ali
in *The Cloud
Door* (1994)



making up with his wife after quarrelling with her over his refusal to drink a glass of milk, the boy director handled volumes and cinematic space with great assurance and originality. This is all the more astonishing as at that time at the Film Institute very little practical training in cinematography was imparted to students of the direction course. This ability to 'see' and 'transform' has, perhaps, its origins in his childhood.

As a little boy growing up in Udaipur in Rajasthan he suffered from acute myopia and was unable to see

the blackboard in school. He regarded this phenomenon as normal till he was caught out by his father on a family excursion and treated. When he saw the world with his first pair of glasses it was magical and for a long time he would get up at the crack of dawn to see the city of Udaipur come alive before his eyes.

When he made *A Day's Bread* in 1970 on Mohan Rakesh's story he was 26. The Film Finance Corporation, now the National Film Development Corporation, gave him just enough money to stay alive - Rs. 250,000 or just over US\$ 25,000 at the time. With an Arriflex camera and six lights he made a visual tour de force that also made the reputation of his colleague, the cinematographer K K Mahajan.

Using the tonal range of the black and white emulsion with distinction, he brought into play the 32mm lens' distinctive qualities in portraiture. He photographed his lead actress, and paid tribute to her in close-up with this problematic wide-angle lens that could distort the human face at a close range. The lonely housewife, standing underneath a tree on the highway with a tiffin carrier for her truck-driver husband has become a memory-image in Indian and indeed world cinema. He had, by his own admission, photographed this silent, gentle beautiful woman with a 32mm from slightly below eye-level with the camera tilting ever so slightly up. This shawl-draped beauty with sad eyes, whose lot is to wait for her not always reliable man, is the first of Kaul's suffering heroines. The others are Mallika, the great Sanskrit poet

Kalidasa's beloved in the period piece based on Mohan Rakesh's *A Monsoon Day* and the silent bride in *In Two Minds*.

Kaul's feeling for the human face is only matched by his love for landscape, albeit animated by the human presence. Take, for instance, the shot of the train drawn by a steam engine chugging across a serene, almost dormant nature in *A Day's Bread*. It has all the grave beauty of a sustained note - in a vocal alap (introduction) in *Dhrupad* singing. Kaul, much later, went to the veena maestro Zia Mohiuddin Dagar,

scion of the illustrious Dagar family, one of the leading exponents of *Dhrupad*, the most ancient form of Hindustani classical music. The cinematic image of the train almost presages a deeply embedded yearning within the director.

A 'musical' image but different in content and spirit is that of a horse seen from a high-angle, open window, disappearing down a wooded path subtly graded in greys in *A Monsoon Day*. It has within it contradictory resonances: of pulsating-life and of loss, thus being celebratory and elegiac at the one and the same time.

There are other instances from the same film that bring a lump to one's throat. Take, for instance, Mallika in mid-shot feeding her pet deer: a functional act in a miracle of lighting and composition is suddenly changed into an intensely poetic one. Another example is the final meeting of the poet Kalidasa with Mallika in middle-age in the key shot of the film as the camera tilts up towards a sky full of shredded clouds after Kalidasa has told his beloved about the vastness of life and by implication their own place in its expanse. The viewer is suddenly overcome with powerful emotion thus giving the lie to the charge made by many critics that Mani Kaul's work lacks emotion.

In the very same film he also used cross-fades within the same sequence, sometimes within the same scene, to handle both time and mood in a unique way. Here time, seemingly suspended for the waiting Mallika, is surreptitiously marking and transforming her as it is the surrounding countryside. This is the second remarkable example of the use of opticals in postwar cinema, the other being in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour*, where the painful memories of the French heroine's past overlap with the present thus subtly altering, influencing her relationship with her Japanese lover, both of whom have come through the Second World War with scarred psyches.

Kaul's career has been dogged till recently by the lack of proper funding and he has invariably fallen back on Government funding that has been far from generous. He has as a result developed great resourcefulness and can give more value for money than any other director in the business. The only other person who could perhaps match him in this regard was the late G Aravindan.

By the time *In Two Minds*, his third film, was made

he was literally without any resources. Armed with a 16mm Bolex reflex camera with a constant speed motor, a 16-86mm Switar Zoom lens, a tripod and four sun guns, two of which failed in the fluctuating voltage conditions that mark rural electricity supply in India, Kaul ventured forth into the deserts of Rajasthan to shoot his unusual love story derived from a folk tale of a wife impregnated by a ghost while her trader husband is away. Making a virtue of necessity he used the Kodachrome Reversal emulsion rated at 25 ASA daylight and 40 ASA tungsten with telling effect to make a haunting film.

He used the limitations of his audio-visual resources to find a new narrative mode and examine the silent cinema technique of telling the story through pictures. He employed a charged folk ballad as a leitmotif to punctuate the narration that used the spoken word sparingly. With practically no lights to work with, he even managed a few elegant night sequences. But the most memorable image was a zoom out from a tree with almost translucent healthy green leaves photographed in the evening cross-light as the silent bride goes away in a bullock cart towards a desert expanse.

He was to turn, with a typical mixture of cussedness and ability, the zoom lens into a potent weapon of expression later when he went on to make *Dhrupad* on the Dagar Bani or Dagar School of *Dhrupad* singing and *veena* playing. He again made the simplest and most effective shot in the film: an austere zoom out of a lad practising singing in a corridor tells us more about the subject than the bravura sequence in the end that leaves the viewer in awe because of the sheer expertise of camera movement and the manipulation of space, hence perspective.

He has with good reason become a cult figure because of his phenomenal grasp of craft. He can work with a novice cameraman and make him perform like a champion. When *In Two Minds* was made on a schoolboy's pocket money he personally photographed the 16mm reversal original on 35mm Eastman negative frame by frame over a period of fifteen days on the Oxberrystand set up for him especially at Prasad Laboratories, Madras, 23 years ago. This was in the pre-liquid gate days and blowing up footage from 16mm to 35mm was a very risky business. Those who have seen the film will always remember its images. It is indeed a great pity that only soldiers get decorated for gallantry in

action beyond the call of duty. Had there been such a provision for artists then Kaul would have been amongst the first to be so honoured.

He has always heavily influenced the look of every film of his and has conclusively proved that he, and not the cameraman, is responsible for the visual style that has come to dominate his work - especially after his first two films. This is all the more interesting because he has never ever transgressed upon the rights of the operating cameraman. When circum-

tended to disregard the written text, being the first 'non-literary' director in Indian films. In the early days of his grand forays into black and white, he eschewed dramatic dialogue delivery in favour of a slow, deliberate style that made him a butt of jokes. But he somehow transcended this by using his flair for incidental sounds and music. His feature films followed a style that was diametrically opposite to the prevalent dramatic one favoured by large audiences. The tempo too was slow though never without interest.

The biggest hurdle that he had to overcome like every genuine filmmaker was the use of colour. He was at pains to learn to use it organically, eloquently and not symbolically or decoratively. He did not always succeed as his love for primary colours was very strong. However, he often managed to turn a weakness into a virtue and without notice could produce an image that gripped the imagination - for example the shot of the dark, almost subterranean glove on the beach against a glowing background of pearly pink taken early in the morning in *Idiot*. It may interest readers to know that



Zia Mohiuddin
Dagar in *Dhrupad*
(1982)

stances pushed him against the wall he unhesitatingly chose the extraordinary still photographer Navroz Contractor to photograph *In Two Minds*. Similarly when he did documentaries for the stultifying (government) Films Division of India, he worked with journeymen cameramen whom he inspired to perform way beyond their customary proficiency. *Nomad Puppeteers of Rajasthan* and *Arrival* prove the point.

In recent years he has helped cinematographer Piyush Shah find himself. He told him in his typical, casual manner that the most expressive range on the zoom lens is between 28 and 40mm - that is where a film gets made! He also informed the focus-puller Rafe Muhammad, about how to pull focus in an expressive, but unobtrusive way so that the viewer feels the impact of the exercise without ever noticing the means employed to achieve it. It took twelve takes to get the necessary shot but at the end of it there was great satisfaction for both the teacher and the pupil.

If all this reads like a eulogy then it is only partially true. He has had problems with scripts and

this film was shot entirely with a 28mm lens; Kaul uses the distorting characteristics of this wide-angle lens to mirror the distortions in the lives of his characters. Incidentally *Idiot* also makes virtuoso use of the crab dolly in interiors. His ways of seeing will certainly be enhanced as he works with European labs. Rank, London processed his latest featurette *The Cloud Door* and shall presumably process the next one *Danish Girls Show Everything*. He is, finally in his early fifties, finding backing in Europe that will enable him to work comfortably after years of struggle.

His vision of the world changed after his last three films. He seemed at that point ready to become a woman's director like Kenji Mizoguchi, Max Ophüls and George Cukor, all masters temperamentally dissimilar to him and to each other but united in their love for women. Kaul proceeded in the direction of information gathering, towards a highly personal, poetic notion of the documentary form. With *Idiot* he has come back to fiction films and shall, it is hoped, stay there a long time finding new avenues of exploration with his hard won mastery of film craft.



Siddheshwari
(1989)

QUESTIONING FIXED NOTIONS

Soon after a
screening of *Idiot*
Mani Kaul answered
questions on his kind
of cinema to
16-year-old
Inca Yamini Roy

How different is your film, Idiot, from the book? How different is the story? And when you began to make the film did you intend for the film to fall into the same pattern as the book or did you see it differently?

I tried to be as close to the book as possible. But I was not interested in creating an interpretation of it. The book has a very definite view and I was not interested in that kind of interpretation because I had a view. I can tell you about what I feel.... I am very interested in characters that are not confined geographically, or are culturally very specifically

located. The main character, Myshkin, is very much Russian in the book but you do not know where he is from.

In the film you don't know how he is linked with the people in Bombay - you don't understand whose son he is, how he knows the servant in the other family. It's very confusing.

But that part is not confusing for long. You see, the whole problem today as I see it, and what affects me very deeply, is the conflict of identity. In fact, it's such a superficial conflict of identity based on religious and cultural issues. Communities are prejudiced against each other all over the world, not just in India. For me, it is very important to find somebody we don't know anything about. In fact, when for the first time he hears about the marriage - where he gets an epileptic fit - the excitement for him is great.... It's the anonymity I like but the word anonymous is not a very happy word because today it has various connotations - associated with consumerism. Like in today's world the human being too is like an object in the market. The culture with which we are associated is also being destroyed so we are also becoming the anonymous man in a consumerist world.

So how's this connected with the film?

I am talking in two ways - when I use the word anonymous, I do not mean this kind of anonymity. I mean, he is still fresh and pure - where the mind is still alive to traditions.

Yes, he is the most innocent in the world. That's what makes him an idiot.

But he is not an idiot

No, he is not innocent in the face of struggle -

But that does not come out in your film, unless one follows it very thoroughly or closely. He is actually the wisest of them all.

There's a slight problem, which I wanted to avoid. He could easily



have been made into a religious figure - a moral and religious figure. I didn't want that at all.

How would it be moral?

Because he becomes a character who is so very sacrificing and suffers a lot. Therefore, he is more intelligent. He is not intelligent simply because he knows more or he can answer questions. When he talks, you realise he knows more about life itself. There is a problem, you know - he might come across as a pathetic figure.

But you don't have to involve religion if you want to make a person intelligent. It doesn't come through religion.

What does it come through? I mean, I also believe that it does not come through religion.

*Intelligence from my point of view ... comes from -
From?*

I don't know because I haven't read the

book - I don't know how he got to be more intelligent than the rest of them. You can see from the way he talks, from some of the things he says that he is a thinker. He is more involved in his own world and he's an observer. He thinks about everything he observes.

Well, when I said that there's a danger of turning him into a religious figure, what I meant was that you may have a problem of intelligence. You tend to create an image of intelligence in which case the person develops certain signs and ways of behaviour, talking, sometimes manipulating languages, which makes him sound intelligent. But being intelligent is a very difficult thing. What you are talking of is a certain behaviour. That's an image of intelligence. To be honest is something else. It's not behaving intelligently. I may not behave intelligently but I am -

But when I talk to you I can make out you're very intelligent.

You see, it's not that when we associate a certain kind of behaviour with being innocent or gullible that we shift the whole issue to a moral ground. For example, this is an intelligent man: see how he talks, how he sits.

No, an intelligent man can sit any way he likes.

Then you're saying he looks dumb. He need not look intelligent.

You have to have something that can show his intelligence!

But now that's debatable. The idea of behaviour is at the root of the concept of characterisation. That you make a character and say that this character is going to be good, then you associate one kind of behaviour with him. See, if I say, this character is going to be corrupt -

You're going to make him behave like a corrupt character. So, you make him hold a glass in a particular way and say a bad man holds a glass like that: a good man will pick up his glass gently, a bad man will handle it roughly.

You have an order in mind the moment you start to interview; everything that doesn't pertain to the interview is unnecessary. Which brings me to the second question: how that which is unrelated is unnecessary to the unfolding of the plot.

Like the role of the sister - you don't actually come to know that she's married

incorporated in the form, but that is the second question. Anyway, I was talking of the question of behaviour. When you have very stereotypical characters in the films it is actually based on the reduction of a certain kind of behaviour - meaning if I want the character of corrupt person what should I look for in the person?

An absolutely corrupt person can be an absolutely smooth talker. You can have a very kind, normal person who's not the slightest bit suspicious.... I don't know how to explain this.

What you are trying to say is that the idea of corruption may not vividly show on a person ... how does one convey that in a film? If you're not showing it physically then what is its existence in the film?

That's it -

Forget about my film. I am raising an issue: that when you're showing an intelligent man and you do not wish to show it physically how do you convey his qualities - of how much he knows, what are his capacities to grasp and to learn, his capacity to innovate, capacity

to make new links. These are all his qualities and if it does not have to show on his face or his body or the way he sits, then how do you show it?

By the way he talks to somebody, in a conversation

If you take a person in real life



to the man. Like the roles you talked of, that do not have any particular sequences in the story. I couldn't understand at least. But you said it helps to orchestrate the sequence.

But there's something in it that connects with an outside world; it is something actually very valid. Something that needs to be

who's like Myshkin, a thinker, an observer who does not express his ideas clearly but is actually very intelligent, then at some point people should realise he is intelligent.

See, I have personally done away with the idea of characterisation, because I feel that characterisation does not belong to cinema. It belongs either to a certain kind of theatre or to a certain kind of literature, and I think even literature has

Before my Eyes
(1988)



given it up. It is just not the essential issue anymore, at least with me. The conflict - all the drama as far as I am concerned - comes not only through the people I am using, it comes through the image that I am using, the sound I am using, the editing that I am doing. My editing, my camera positions, my sound, music, are not meant only to enhance the performance of the actors. I believe that if you're given my film, and if you are not looking at the people, but the whole image, you'll get involved and absorbed in the idea as the film unfolds. What I am trying to say is it is not just the person, but the whole image that is important. My film *Before My Eyes*, shot in Kashmir, which is 23 minutes long, has got nothing except mountains, forests, rocks, trees. It's not meant to create specific

thoughts as one does in a feature film in which one has to deal with very specific plots and channelise thoughts.

Yes, but in cinema you're used to everything being laid out for you, the story, the structure, everything has a specific form - the way people behave - you know that this person is a fool, that this person is good. But with you, you have a different point of view, you don't want to do it in that particular way.

That is the first assumption. The second is whether that person or group of people will relate to the entire image. The painter Cézanne used to take very little time to paint eyes which is the most important feature of the face and he used to take two to three months painting the sea, because he said that "there's no corner of a painting." For him

the entire image was important. Now, for example, if you work with an actor often the actor only wants to show only his or her face, so I tell them no, I am going to show only your hands, and just like your face this is 'your' hand, how can you say that your face is more precious than your hand? How can you feel that way? I have paid attention to these details. If you stand in front of an image you won't look at the hands immediately; you look at the face because somehow you believe in a centre to the universe. Philosophers have for the last thousands of years believed in the 'certainty' of the universe, that there is nothing uncertain about it. Similarly, the face is the centre of the body. Now I believe that this is actually uncertain, and that there is no centre, either of the universe or of the body.

Your films are among the very few that play on sound and have no specific story. *Idiot* is more abstract and if you do not want the audience to follow your dialogue too closely but concentrate on the sound and the image, then I think it is too long.

The basic problem arises in not being able to relate to a work which does not have, first, a centre and, then, a structure. A structure enables you to relate to the whole meaning. If I make something in clay, I take some wire and create a rough structure of the figure and then I start putting some clay around those pliable wires and this structure is not just holding the clay or giving it form but also guiding it. It also makes you relate to the whole immediately; you have an idea of what the posture is like, it gives you a contact with the whole. Now, in any architecture, the idea of the structure is to provide a contact with whole of the building. Neemrana, where I shot my film *The Cloud Door*, is a fort which I am told took some 400-500 years to make. Nobody had an idea, when the fort began, of what it would look like. They began with terraces, certain kinds of doors, certain windows, with voids but with no idea of a whole; so there is this material but no structure. But now you can look at that fort again and again everyday because what is happening is that everyday it gets a new alignment: a dome gets aligned to a window in a certain way, and because of a change in a certain position and because of no overriding structure that was present before the window came into existence, you suddenly discover a completely shifted or changed alignment. Or you find a wall aligned with the hill in a certain way, and the light changes as evening falls and it is a different alignment in a

different way.

The idea of perspective arose from the idea of convergence and the idea of structure arose from that of perspective. Imagine what kind of films I make - when I don't have a centre, or a structure of which I am not certain. What I want to relate to is the idea of uncertainty - crucial for me is the uncertain. There is a possibility that the audience will not understand, but the more unfortunate thing is that there is not even a curiosity to understand - which is a tragedy.

I understand very well your point of view and how you -

Sorry for interrupting you; won't you grant me this much that a film like that for the first time will cause a very severe sense of disorientation - I mean, you can't blame me, you know!

No, I'm not blaming you. I suppose each time one looks at your films one sees

something new, a different angle.

It's not a question of seeing something new, but because of the film, something arises in your head because of what you see.

What?

A new thought - that is the purpose of my film. If the film is to show you something that is already known, not only by the filmmaker but also by the audience, where will it lead us?

At any given stage of time for all that we know, there's always something that is unknown.

There has been no time in the history of the world when everything has been known and there shall be no time when everything will be known. It's an impossibility. Can you imagine when you look at the stars, and you know yourself as part of a galaxy, as part of a universe - where does it end? If it doesn't end then we're living in a very,

very uncertain

world. If we're doing that, then where is the question of certainly ending a film, or of certainly making a character, or of making a structure?

That's what we look for when we go to a film. You don't want to look at an uncertain universe which won't end - or end only on account of time. I made a

film like that, but it ended because physically I can't make a film of more than two hours. I mean, that the film can end only physically.

But if you make a film that people do not understand -

That's a possibility - that they would not understand. But the more unfortunate thing is that there's not even a curiosity to understand which is a tragedy. What I am trying to say is that the

Stills from
Idiot



world we are exposed to on television is killing the capacity of wanting to understand. It feeds you like you're a sick, old person at home and it feeds you as if you have no capacity for chewing. I am using the word chewing because the mind is like the stomach. What food is to stomach, thought is to the mind. If I were to give you only pre-digested material where the mind does not have to exercise itself you would sooner or later lose the capacity of making your own kind of links, of utilising your mental muscles.



Right: *Light
Apparel*
(1995)

Extreme
right:
*Before my
Eyes* (1988)



Often, while looking at Mani Kaul's work, I have been moved to think if there is life for cinema beyond the image; if, indeed, a cinema of 'being' against that of the 'subject', is truly possible; also, if it is possible to devise a new ecological sign that would follow the trail of cinema beyond the movement and time of its image to unexpected openings, to the site of another, altogether new, image. How else does one talk about the ecologues of cinema who,

unlike its auteurs, chose to speak from the fragile margins of cinema to intuit its new possibilities; ecologues who opened 'the question of being' in turning quietly away from the highways of narrative where the subject never failed to achieve a certain disposition in rhetoric; ecologues who created space through oneiric resonance of partial memories and cast words and things in a durative stillness against the violence of causality in history! I have often wondered

if in some way Mani Kaul's work did not reopen the problematic ontology of cinema to unhinge its anchor in the image of 'home'.

Mani Kaul's work has never failed to raise some of the most unusual and, to my mind, extremely important questions about cinema....

There is an inherent difficulty to bind Mani's work within a context even though one could mention a few invocations here: his teacher and guru, Ritwik Ghatak; the classical Indian texts



THE REMOVED IMAGE

NOTES

ON

MANI KAUL

MAADAN GOPAL SINGH



on aesthetics - Dhvanyalok (The Luminous Sound), the 9th century treatise on literature, and Sangeet Samay Saar, the 13th century treatise on music; dhruwad, the earliest form of Indian classical music; Matisse and Bresson. More definitively, however, one could begin by creating a new binary where one pitches a sensuous ethic of separation against the formal idea of unity. The idea of unity cast the image within a mimetic mode of continuity and balance. It was only in conjunc-

tion with an other (image), in creating a symbolic exchange through this conjunction, that the image validated its existence. The fact of its own production remained unreal except in reference to the dominant (narrative) that it helped bring about in the first place. The image had been, as if, destinially, exhausted by the conventions of subjectivity. By itself, it could appear, therefore, as only a formal choice - a reference, a citing, a signpost from other

narrative drives or cultural cross-currents - but never as a 'clearing' or something leading to a 'clearing'.

Mani Kaul's work is impelled by an ethic of separation. His impatience with a particular narrative disposition or even with the narrative form itself could possibly be linked to this ethic. His persistent refusal to cast his work within the conventions of subjectivity makes it not a little difficult to write about his work within a dominant mode of



Mind of Clay (1985)

thinking which pitches its entire argument around modern/postmodern cultural practices. It would seem as if questions regarding the narrative choices thrown up by the archetypal and historical subject have been resolutely put under erasure. It is almost impossible to critique his work within the known allegories of nationality. He rigorously pushes the image into a pre-narrative space.¹ It is perhaps here that the problematic concerning the ontology of the cinematic image is reopened. We reach this space to find that the narrative has been played out already, brought to an end, much like the ontology which appears only after the philosophy has ended in a way in which we speak of the end of philosophy: not as death but as a condensation and a possible reorganisation. And, even though one may feel slightly more comfortable in speaking about his aesthetic choices,² such enumerations may often turn to be not a little misleading in their witting/unwitting anxiety to exhumate spectres of formalism. It is obvious that Mani Kaul is not a formalist. The sites where 'the question of being' resonates here function like blindspots: fluid and contradictory. The sites of subjectivity, however, function as perhaps the only formal sites of construction.

The First Films

In his first two films, *A Day's Bread* and *A Monsoon Day*, Mani Kaul put the schema of unity into an irreversible paradox. Within an apparently continuous mode of representation, he developed time as an integral of the feminine imaginary - a time without home or even a reference within the symbolic order of exchange. Surrounded by a symbolic

cosmology, the incessantly waiting women go through the durative stillness of being - fragile at first but gaining in fortitude as they gradually assume an existence uncomfortably contiguous but ironically independent of the exchange (home and outside; love and trauma) to which they had seemed to have been almost fatalistically bound. The stillness of look and body, invoking the paintings of Amrita Sherghill and the frescoes from the Ajanta caves, grows with reticence into an ecological sign - a non-transgressive mode of duration. A gesture deepens in space, a sense of time surfaces on the periphery. For a while space and time become indistinct within an unusual pacing of the posture. This rhythm of the imaginary, which cannot be explained away as a question of stylisation alone, brings the unity of the narrative drive to eventually dissolve without disintegrating. (This to my mind, is the crucial difference between him and the other 'stylist' of the 70s, Kumar Shahani, who pushes the gesture, through a rhythm of the symbolic, back into the narrative drive.) The continuous mode of space, the suffused elemental signs, the saturated 'look' all contribute to his initial exploration of the imaginary in his earlier work. Time begins to appear as the barely perceptible threshold of being.

The classical Sanskrit poet, Kalidasa, who remains a major presence³, if not exactly an influence, for both Mani Kaul and his teacher Ritwik Ghatak, developed a tertiary schema to create the imaginary of both space (a limen between heaven and earth) and time (a limen between remembrance and

forgetfulness) in his celebrated play *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* (Remembering Shakuntala). He rejected a simple inscription/dissolution of this imaginary within the symbolic order constituted almost entirely as a referential range. The woman is forgotten because she fails to produce the reference



Left: Arising from the Surface (1980)

which would function as a condensation of narrative and of power. The woman has forgotten the 'name of the father' much earlier. The woman bears the weight/wait of the child in her womb (a limen between the imaginary and the symbolic). The woman retreats to an as yet unformed cosmology, a third space, which could be recovered only after the symbolic formations - the heaven and earth, i.e., - have receded and the woman has become an ecological possibility. The woman gives birth to the child and is eventually received at the threshold but only to be included within the symbolic order.

In different ways, both Mani Kaul and Ritwik Ghatak dissolve the binary schema with which narrative subjectivity is most often constituted. In different ways, both invent their imaginary to excavate the ecological sign.

Ghatak envisions woman as a possibility to open the enclosure of the symbolic, although she herself does not enter the domain of the symbolic. She is not a subject of history for she is always already larger than subjectivity. Ghatak's is the cinema of melodic excess where,

too, space and time appear to become indistinct within the feminine conscience. It is as if the entire cosmos appears as a mirror to this feminine imaginary. The wedge between the two, the turmoil of the lived, is sutured by a real too vast to remember. It is through her that the sites of faded memory begin to resonate. The

unflinching affirmation of hope in his work is actually the coming together of these resonant sites - not as references but as memories that are cleft and without articulation. His is the cinema of *grand poetic conscience*. His other disciple, Kumar Shahani, tries, on the other hand, to stage woman between subjectivity and para-subjectivity (cf. *Tarang/Wages and Profits*, 1984). The sites of memory are, here, transformed into points of reference in order that the vitality of the new epistemes of history could be both interpreted and built upon in its complexity. In this sense, Kumar is closer to the *modern epic form*. Mani Kaul, whom Ghatak had once described as someone who had a tilt in his brain and who was almost boyishly in love with words,⁴ has repeatedly posed 'the question of being'⁵ within the imaginary of feminine desire in *A Days Bread*, *A Monsoon Day* and,

more recently, in *Siddheswari*. Memory, here, is neither the cleft site of melodic excess nor a fixed point of reference; it functions, instead, as an oneiric reticence simultaneously closed and open like the luminous poetic word.... Both Ghatak and Mani belong to an indigenous oral tradition.

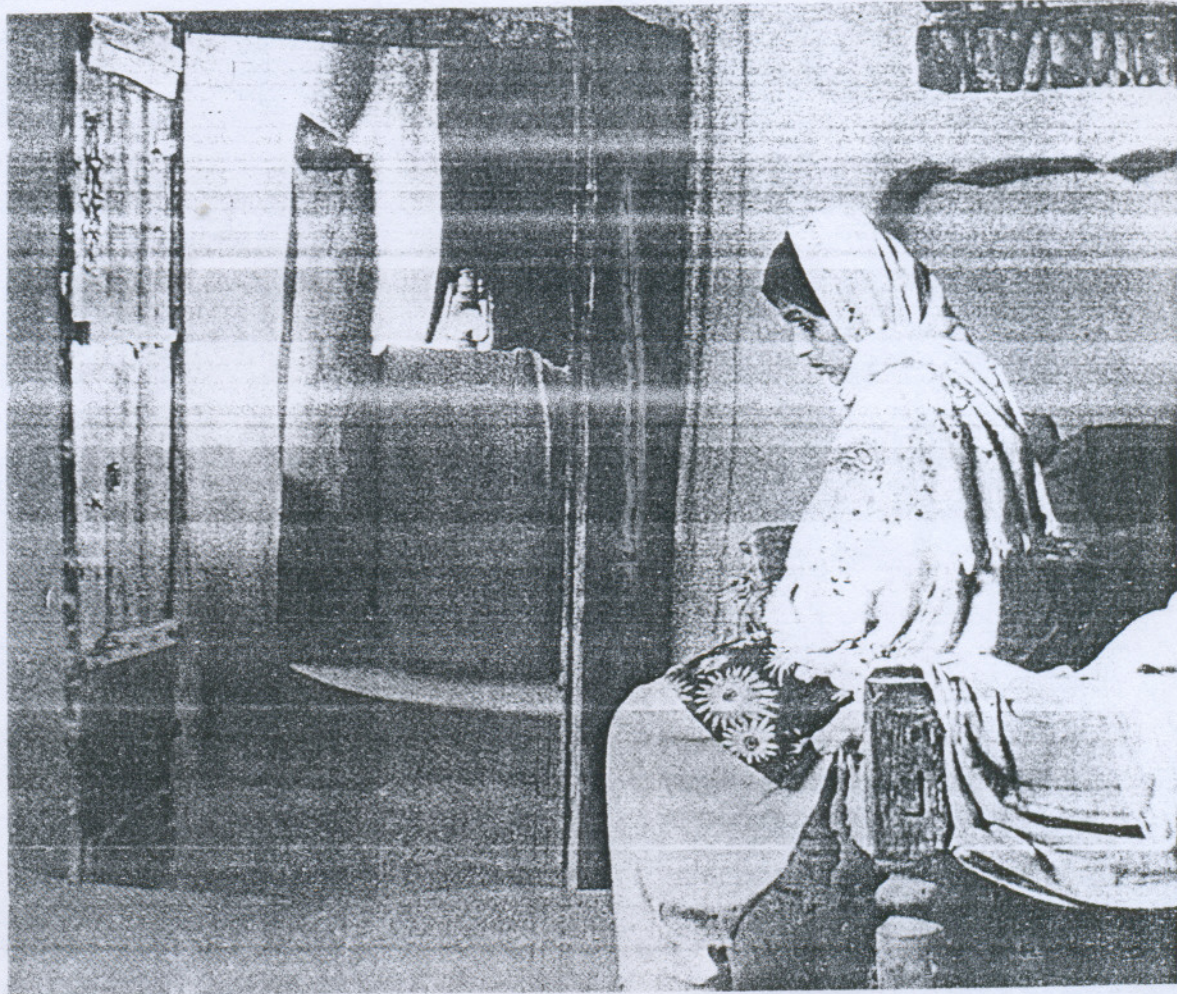
Whereas orality in Ghatak reappears in the form of insomnia and melodic excess, in Mani Kaul, until very recently (*The Gaze*), it is seen to be closer to sleep and silence. The 'tilt in his brain', is like a transgression of the self. Unlike Ghatak who lived the life of a nomad, Mani Kaul could be described, with some reticence, as a monad. They both live the metaphor of 'homelessness' and in living it become enormously different from each other.

I have often wondered if the idea of 'a vital tradition demanding sharp differences and violent breaks'⁶ aptly describes the continuity between Ritwik Ghatak, Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani. What brings Ritwik Ghatak and his students together appears to me to be more of a filial bond. Mani's relationship, however, escapes this simple, though highly productive, narcissism. To extend a Hegelian phrase, though not without some degree of trepidation, his is a relation of 'homage and parricide'.⁷

For Ghatak, the *real* is his effective field; for Kumar, it is quite specifically the *symbolic*; for Mani, however, it has been the *imaginary*, always.

The Second Phase

In the second phase of his work, Mani Kaul moved away from the paradox of unity and entered the far more fluid domain of dispersals. The first indication of this shift had become visible in *In Two*



Minds itself where a clear disjunction had appeared within the 'classical' unity of time and space. The folktale regarding the two claimants of the bride - the real man (a trader who is also a husband) and the virtual man (a lover who has been a ghost for a long long time) - not only brought into play the ideological category of 'alienation' as an extension of his earlier exploration of the imaginary but it also strongly hinted at the possibility of a virtual universe of both narrative and cinema. In a radical departure from the earlier two films, *In Two Minds* was cast in a world bereft of time, a world constituted almost exclusively by space. Evacuated of time, the space became flat and hauntingly polemicised the objectification of the being and the image. Time,

however, appeared as an absence - as the edge of music, the human voice outside the narrative, that cut through the stillness of this space.

The domain of dispersals is itself divided into phases. The first one constitutes thought as an act of decentring and ends with *Arising from the Surface*. The shift, as became visible in *In Two Minds*, is even more clearly from 'the question of being' to thinking about 'the question of being'. Though the ideological categories such as 'alienation' and 'objectification' are more concretely in evidence here, these are also, in a way, subverted by a surreal, almost phantasmic, presence which is felt rather than seen. This is also the site where one could locate the creative anxiety of the author in the film. The

imaginary, thus, becomes a functional principle of thought and moves freely through the interstices of a number of short stories and poems by the Marxist Hindi poet, Muktibodh.

The dispersal constituted as both intertextual and intratextual movement in *Arising from the Surface* hinted at the possibility of an acented cinema. It had, perhaps, something to do with his exploration of the musical forms where the musical note becomes perpetually homeless within the given musical structure. It had also something to do with the idea of range as proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Mille Plateau* where the overflowing grass emerge as the moral lesson. The idea of depth and centre inherent in the image of 'root' was definitively cast

away.

Siddheshwari, based on the life of the legendary exponent of the semi-classical musical form, *thumri*, was his first film essay in which the idea of limen or the barely perceived threshold - 'the question of being' as an acentring - was fully stretched. The 'name of the father', as in Kalidasa, is forgotten. Both space and time appear as an unfolding range like the city of Benaras which, in its pre-narrativity conceals shadows of narratives almost impossible to remember. Such a cinema is unthinkable without a degree of blindness which comes with the dissolution of the gaze.

I recollect a screening of Mani Kaul's *The Gaze* (an adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Meek One*) where a fellow filmmaker, with characteristic self-assurance, had raised objections to Mani Kaul's rather 'determined' obfuscation of sound. He had a genuine problem in granting sound an existence beyond the double edge of information and ambient sensuousness and seemed politely amused at *The Gaze*'s unhelpful soundtrack. In effect, it meant that cinema had little chance of surviving beyond the monologic interiority and dialogic exchange.

The question, as it had appeared to me, then, was whether sound, beyond a certain feel of orality could, here and there, appear, like silence, as the 'open space of voice'.⁸ Like the sound that returns to you when you first speak on landing at any pre-narrative space! A space that has lain unnoticed and fallow - on the edge of a faded memory! Sound, here, would be recovered not merely as an echo but as a clearing, as something returned in an open enclosure. Even as I turned the argument in my mind I began to gradually feel that the

traces of new cinematic enunciation could possibly be found on the hidden footways of the sound-image....

Mani's is a cinema about possibilities. Casting almost the entire film in a maze of virtual reality, casting it in the mirror, as it were, giving the 'cut' (or is it the 'joint') an autonomy from a 'life before' and into a 'life after', spreading the imaginary almost infinitely across the domain of the-lived, with *The Gaze* and *Idiot*, he moves into an area of excessivity as immediate and urgent as the sense of overhanging breath that one experiences in Dostoevsky's endless monologues that seem to exorcise the phantoms of the symbolic.

Notes

1. With self-assured irony, Satyajit Ray declares Mani Kaul's cinema to have 'wilfully adopted a very special and very private mode of expression.' In a statement that reads like inverted ridicule, he calls him a phenomenon in the history of Indian cinema for having 'not only done away with most of the clichés of narrative cinema, but with most of its axioms too.' What surprises him, however, is that Mani too 'has not discarded narrative itself.' Extending the range of his ridicule, he likens his image to that of the 'chic in modern advertising photography'. See Satyajit Ray's 'Four and a Quarter' in his *Our Films Their Films*, Calcutta, 1976.

This response is almost symptomatic of the objections that were raised against Mani Kaul's work initially. It was severely panned for obvious radical deviation from a known narrative behaviour and even more for its not so obvious though equally radical spatio-temporal aspiration. In likening Mani's image to that of advertisement photography, what Ray shockingly overlooks is its spatio-temporal demeanour. The advertisement image is valorised only in its dismemberment. Mani's image, on the other hand, puts it through a pre-narrative space (and time) to recover its body within the site of ontology.

2. Arun Khopkar adduces the 'gestures and postures from the paintings of Amrita Shergill, the sidelong glances and *tribbhanga* postures from the frescoes of Ajanta and Levi-Strauss's structural analysis of myths' amongst the major influences in Mani Kaul's early cinema.

See Arun Khopkar 'Works of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani' in TM Ramachandran edited *70 Years of Indian Cinema*, Bombay, 1985, p 189

3. Mani's *A Monsoon Day* depicts Kalidasa's

return to his original 'home' - nature suffused as an elemental sign - after having been anointed by the court and married off to the princess. The beloved back home receives news of his success as a writer and courtier but also of his marriage. The symbolic bond of love and creative compassion that bound her to the poet becomes an imaginary of remembrance and forgetfulness much as it did in *Abhigyan Shikuntalam*.

Ritwik Ghatak's *Komal Gandhar* (1961) is similarly woven around the theme of remembrance and forgetfulness and, in fact, builds a lot of the narrative action around an actual dramatisation of Kalidasa's play.

4. "An Interview with Ritwik Ghatak", by Ravi Ojha and Judhajit Sarkar in *Film Miscellany*, Pune, 1976.

5. He is perhaps the only Indian filmmaker to do so. Others like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and the late G Aravindan have addressed themselves to notions of interiority rather than the question of being.

6. Arun Khopkar, *ibid*, p. 188.

7. In her translator's preface to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out how in explaining the preface's relationship to the text, Hegel had coined this paradoxical image.

8. John Sallis: "Echoes: Philosophy and Non-Philosophy After Heidegger" in Hugh J Silverman ed. *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty*, New York, 1988.

Sallis begins his essay with a description of him wandering alone in the Alps under a clear sky where the transparent intensity of sunlight is cooled by the mask of fresh mountain air: "... climbing over a ridge and then down into a high valley. Boulders are strewn here and there, reminders of deafening avalanches; but now only the occasional tinkle of a cowbell is to be heard. Nothing else ... listening proves so exceptional here because there is almost nothing to hear; but also because the valley, encircled by snow-covered peaks forms a kind of open enclosure into which one's voice can expand and resound. Here monologue and interiority are unthinkable. Instead, the voice is drawn out into a space which, rather than being simply filled by the sound of the voice, claims it and in a sense takes possession of it.... Hearing the echo, one then experiences silence, not as the mere opposite of speech but as the open space of the voice."

Stills from: *The Cloud Door*, *Idiot*, *Before My Eyes*, *Mind of Clay* and Mani Kaul by Lalitha Krishna

AN APPROACH TO NAUKAR KI KAMEEZ

MANI KAUL

The proposed film
is based on
Naukar ki Kameez
(The Servant's Shirt),
a novel in Hindi by
Vinod Kumar Shukla.

The Servant's Shirt defies a reduction of its fictional material to a synopsis or a synoptic treatment. The text may be termed 'non-narrative': it does not plot a structured development of events. Rather than moving to converge, the narrative takes events to elaborate upon them. There is a significant (and historical) difference between the two approaches. The former finds its origins in the discovery of 'perspective' during the European Renaissance, whereas the latter has been deeply explored in India and made the basis of transmission of musical and philosophical knowledge.

Convergence (or 'climax' in the conventional narrative) is very much the fruit of a movement that runs from a foreground to a middle ground to a background, casting a horizon where parallel lines are 'seen' to converge. After a series of minor convergences the major climatic convergence winds up the argument of the narrative discourse. Prior to the appearance of perspective, the epics and later the chronicles spread themselves in the manner of poetic elaboration, expansive description, often not reaching the climax in time when viewed against rhythms prevailing today. The termination of the event which, these days, would be built developing into a climax, did in the traditional texts suddenly appear



at the very end. Fight against perspective has inspired many a modern painter, writer, musician and filmmaker from the turn of the 20th century. The effort in cinema has been naturally limited since the birth of the pinhole camera came about through perspective itself. Perspective also provides an illusion of being or moving in a three-dimensional space, leading up to notions of realism and realist structures of narrative, which control the contemporary idiom in the cinematograph and generate certain powerful clichés, including those that animate hyper-realist conventions.

One of the three experiments I desire to attempt with this project is to not let the cameraman look through the camera while a shot is being taken. Doubtless, I have already tried this experiment in my earlier films but to a limited extent. I believe the moment the eye looks through the camera it 'appropriates' the space: it is filming by a dichotomous organisation that splits the experience of that space into a fork: of being sacred and/or of being profane. Obviously it saves what it knows as sacred from an exposure to what it thinks is profane. In preparing a shot it includes certain features of the space being covered and excludes all the rest that threaten the order of what has been included. What

has been excluded from the composition happens just outside the fringes of the rectangular format (of whatever aspect ratio). To my mind, when that whatever-by-chance does get included, more often than not, it is not an unfortunate accident - it is, on the contrary, coincidental to the intuitive strain of making the very film. The random happening, an inch outside the four lines of the format, when thought of as equally significant to an elaboration (we couldn't call that a construction) makes the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane irrelevant. The secret no longer lies in the manner a space is covered but in the act of covering it. The eye while looking through the camera immediately transposes its spatial material to a vertical/horizontal/diagonal vertex and doing that it walls up the filmed space into significant closure. And therein lies the familiar meaning contained in the 'old' composition. Should the procedure become more open-ended as suggested by us here, are there possibilities of the whole experience turning chaotic?

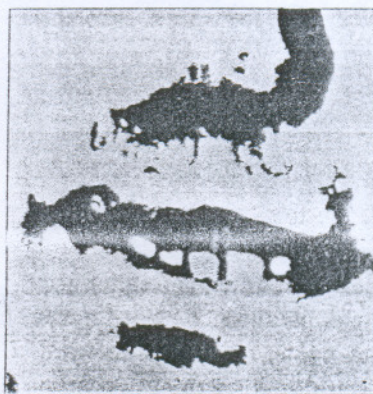
Not looking through the camera frees the camera from a slavish synchronicity with the placements and movements of objects and figures in space. With a flexible difference between the operation of camera and its material, a basis for an open relationship between the two is unlocked. Major factors that shape images such as the lens or the position and the range on the zoom lens, the direction of light, the angle pointing towards the action, the distances that result in orchestration of volumes, the contrast measurements between the lit up areas, the arrangement of colours et cetera, do not

require a looking through the camera. And how by not looking through may we invent the much desired approximation to the feeling in question is something that will become clearer as we proceed.

In a closed relation between the camera and its material, the camera, absorbed by the narrative, is absent and so is the sound, again for reasons of realism, made to duplicate the visual stresses upon the screen. In an encounter with an original Van Gogh, for example, the colour white presents itself as water in a light that may belong to a particular hour and carry a feeling particular to what the artist may have been seized with in that moment of imagination - but it is only a certain distance from the painting that enables us to sustain this vision. For if we approach the painting and in proximity examine its surface, we find the water to be mere paint and a paint that was perhaps directly applied from a tube. The paint as thing has been maintained as a thing the artist worked with and yet it opens a new space in being water. Here the paint, the way of its application and the effect seem to altogether reach an approximation in regard to the feeling at that moment. In order that the discipline of the cinematograph may reach such strength in expression it is imperative that the shot function both as a thing of celluloid and a vision that the thing is able to disclose. I believe every filmmaker is deeply aware of this universal equation and which is why films on filmmaking make the most stimulating films. They contain both the matter and the form. It should be possible to extend that quality to other kinds of films.

In practical terms it is proposed that while the cameraman

responds to space and movement with certain rhythms that are linked to specific feelings, the director may oversee the entire shooting on a video monitor hooked to an output from the camera. Instead of composing by visual control and execution, the director would employ a more intrinsic artistic gift of selection: recognise the living moment - when it takes place. What needs to be determined by the director and the cameraman is the act of making the shot: attention being that aspect of time that deeply colours the emergent feeling in a shot. The technical arrangement would enable him to abort



extreme mistakes that may take place if the cameraman is not looking through the camera.

The assumption of not looking through the camera naturally presumes that there will be no retakes as understood in the conventions till date. A retake normally involves a desire to see the planned take perfected to a considered notion of how it must finally appear. The retakes repeatedly strive to essay the projected sacred space and any eruption of the unplanned (and therefore profane space) disrupts the very meaning of the enterprise. When one hears the famous exclamation 'cut it' to stop a take in the middle of its filming, most likely some random elements are at work.

Developments such as these are thought of as errors. However, in what we are proposing, the appearance of the random is crucial to certain configurations one may be aspiring to. Of the old order, the great master Robert Bresson is the lone example of a filmmaker who totally accepts the technique of retake. He is known to retake until the actor and the



crew 'give up' - by a paradox the retake in his case reaches a point of no control, of what others have described as the descent of grace upon his shots. For good reason the master never uses the word 'grace' in his writings or interviews: what cannot be controlled cannot be described. His retakes are not five or ten but forty and fifty. The exhaustion of the actors' will and that of the crew lead to notions of predetermination which suit Bresson's own spiritual convictions. With him the moment of realisation is a 'privileged moment', whereas for us movement is hoped to be realised between two moments - whenever, whatever! And therefore, error, with us, is very much an aspect of our art. The new is significant as it becomes. Not the eternal. The reason to retake in our case would be to elaborate and not to repeat, to create figures, new figures upon a moment and not to perfect a singular one, to change angles,

change movements, change lighting in ways that are subtle, even minimal, to make a new becoming in/of space and not to freeze an eternal recurrence.

The 'cut' as a joint is our third step. What has been of importance in splicing two shots is the particular fashion in which the preceding shot terminates and meets the succeeding one at its very beginning. Whatever be the coloration of the joint, the cut is either made to hide or show itself in the service of the narrative. For us the joint, like not looking through the camera, must resonate with coincidental happenings. If the entire significance is saturated in that one instant, i.e., in the last and the first frames of the two shots, the more important wholes (durations) which make up the shots are lost to an oblivion. What is of meaning, of open meaning, is first the duration and second its position. In that order. The other way round, when position is given the first place, the editor can only make an assembly on account of certain preconceptions (of the narrative) and fit in the required 'o.k.' lengths to make the continuity of the illusion more real. This kind of positioning kills the free, the unexpected and the unpremeditated juxtaposition that may arise between the collision of two wholes. Doubtless, the principle of 'duration' which turns a fragment into an overtone of the whole, into a living movement within the filmed material has to be sacrificed.

Once you are open to multiple possibilities through elaborations made during the shooting you may carve out multiple durations that have multiple ways of coming together. Duration is a continuous and unbreakable

stretch which enables a section to function as a part and a whole at the same time. These sections need to be recognised in the 'rushes' without necessarily locating or fixing their positions in different sequences. The joint or the cut thus becomes an indescribable moment and not merely a transit post between spaces. The joint/cut thus disables convergence and instead makes the cinematograph an art of divergence.

The method of 'taking' (shooting) and 'cutting' (editing) offered here as a radical alternative to established conventions may lead us to discredit the use of script, of scripting. It is only partly true. The script, thought out and written in whatever detail, is only a series of notations for my kind of work. But a notation nonetheless does supply to the film a matter and even a body which is useful for the kind of experiments that I feel confident of carrying out. A groundedness should only enhance the nature and quality of the experiments; formal engagements that saw the air with techniques face the danger of falling into empty gestures. The novel and the script of *The Servant's Shirt* pursue the enigma of a clerk named Santu to a self-mocking spiritual depth but at the same time spread the narration on a material width that sweeps across the struggles of a lower middle class life. To us, the author Vinod Kumar Shukla, through his writing, gifts to Santu and to the lower middle class in India a poetics of resilience that he would have in the first place discovered amongst the people he abstracted his novel from. And that is what is precisely hoped for the film and is indeed an important objective we have in mind.

Within the European tradition, I am especially fond of Dostoevsky, Matisse, Bresson and, barring his last two films, Tarkovsky. Despite being very different from one another all four are important for me. Once a student told me that all four had come together in *The Gaze*; they had become suddenly present. Obviously, their presence in my work is an internal presence. I think a lot about what it is which could be common to all four. I feel all of them were working against the idea of perspective and convergence. This was, perhaps, the method of their work. In Dostoevsky, especially, the manner of his writing is such that nowhere do you feel that the world is moving towards a convergence. It is rather as if numerous worlds are opening up...

Bresson's school, like Cézanne's, is constructivist. Cézanne works upon a painting by building one stroke upon another, inducing thus a feeling of light so extraordinary that when he stands next to a hill he can see a blue light. By construction I mean building one thing on top of another and so on. Roughly this is also the definition of structure where one thing is placed on top of another such that if you take away one element it will disrupt the whole (although defining a structure entirely like this will not be appropriate).

Bresson's work is a typical example of construction. It is also closely linked to his philosophy. You would have noticed in his films that a door opens, a person comes out, enters one door, emerges from another, goes down from a third, and then goes out of the room, goes out of the house from a fourth, comes back again, opens a door, enters, opens a chest, takes out something from the chest, puts it on the table - in other words, a person within the labyrinth of the world, in which everyone is caught. Someone - it could be anyone - breaks loose, like this girl in *A Gentle Creature*. Breaking loose here means death. Dying is essential, though not in all his films. Nonetheless, like the ass in *Balthazar* and the girl in *A Gentle Creature*, they achieve 'grace'.

Bresson has spoken about filmmaking in his *Notes on Cinematography*.... He speaks about juxtaposition. Suppose you are not able to find the space for a shot. That is, there is a shot that is not able to express itself. You change its place - take away from where it is placed and put it three shots away and it will suddenly become eloquent.... A shot is born out of closeness to another. There is a thought to this juxtaposition to which Bresson

UNDIVIDED

SPACE

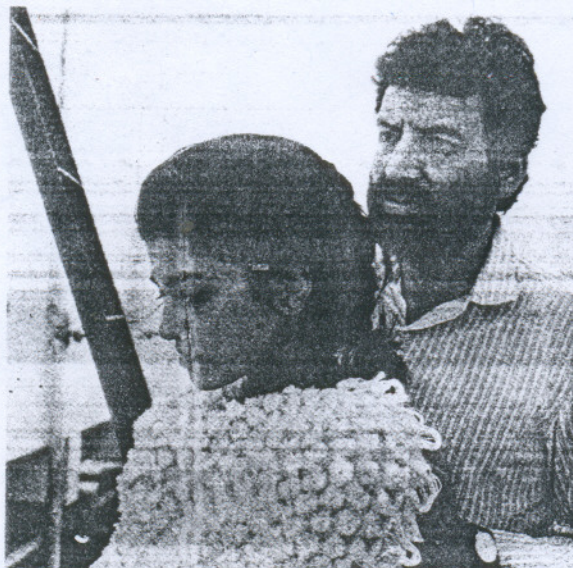
MANI KAUL

SPEAKS TO

UDAYAN VAJPEYI

49

The Gaze
(1990),
with
Shambhavi
and
Shekhar
Kapur



has given great importance. His method of filming is thus a constructivist method. He uses non-actors whom he does not let act. For him acting in cinema is as absurd as a living horse on stage.

The kind of affinity he has with Cézanne, I think I have the same sort of affinity with Matisse. Matisse had a great regard for Cézanne ... although it is difficult to establish any relationship, barring very few canvases, between the two.... Matisse drew figures; he did not construct. This is what had impressed him in the Chinese painting. A figure is born out of a single stroke. There was no need to stand here and construct.... He has himself written that he had become so anarchic that in the end he even forgot to apply colour. He could not understand how to apply colour to painting. In a way, he was saved by an inner relationship with Cézanne.

I feel that I have one relation with Bresson, another with Ritwik Ghatak. But there is a wide difference between the two. It is strange that I have a relation with two persons so contrary in disposition. I am often trying to figure out how one could fuse the two into some sort of harmony. I have absorbed both of them. They are both there inside me. Only now, in *Idiot*, I am beginning to feel that the two have gradually come through a door that has been shut for years. To bring restraint and sensuousness together is an extremely difficult task.

Extract from *Abhed Akash* (Undivided Space) - a long conversation with Mani Kaul. Madhya Pradesh Film Development Corporation, Bhopal, 1994.

Translated from the original Hindi by Madan Gopal Singh

FILMOGRAPHY

1965

Shraddha
(approx. 15 mins)

1966

Yatrik (The Traveller, 20 mins)

1970

Uski Roti (A Day's Bread, 110 mins)

1971

Ashad ka Ek Din
(A Monsoon Day, 143 mins)

1973

Duvidha (In Two Minds, 82 mins)

1974

The Nomad Puppeteers (18 mins)

1977

Chitrakathi (18mins)

1980

Satah se Uthata Aadmi (Arising from the Surface, 114 mins)

Arrival (20 mins)

1982

Dhruvad (72 mins)

1985

Mati Manas
(Mind of Clay, 92 mins)

1986

The Desert of a Thousand Lines

1988

Before My Eyes (23 mins)

1989

Siddheshwari (90 mins)

1990

Nazar (The Gaze, 124 mins)

1992

Idiot (184 mins)

1994

The Cloud Door (26 mins) in the series *Erotic Tales*.

1995

Light-Apparel (4 mins 30 secs)
in the series *Danish Girls Show Everything*

Pre-production

Naukar ki Kameez
(The Servant's Shirt)